

KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD!

FINAL

God's
Blessing
on These
Wonderful
Adventurers!

Natsume
Akatsuki

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kurone
Mishima





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WONDERFUL
WORLD! **17**



**"Explosion!
Exploooooosion!"**

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-
ha-ha-ha! Mwa-
ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!
That's it, Megumin,
keep 'em coming!
You are the world's
strongest wizard!"

"Th-this is hell...
It's hell on earth...!
They'll label
Megumin the
most dangerous
person alive!"

Darkness

Megumin

Kazuma



"K-Kazuma!
Waaaaahhh!
Kazuma, Kazuma,
oh, Kazuma!"

"Aqua...?"

Aqua



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KONOSUBA:
GOD'S BLESSING
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17

NATSUME AKATSUKI

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NEW YORK

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NATSUME AKATSUKI

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Characters



Aqua

Job Arch-priest

An untamable goddess of water. Specialty: party tricks.



Kazuma Satou

Job Adventurer

Our NEET protagonist. His Luck is his only decent trait.



Darkness

Job Crusader

A tanky knight with a major masochistic streak. Daughter of an influential noble house.



Megumin

Job Arch-wizard

Genius of the Crimson Magic Clan. Not interested in anything except explosion magic.

Chapter 1

An Explosion for This Wizard!

1

There's a group in this world known as the Demon King's army. They're way more powerful than humanity, and they've been the common enemy of all living beings in this world for a very long time. They're fearsome foes. Even with immense power granted by the gods, humanity has proven unable to fight back. And we were standing before that terrible force's home base, which was surrounded by a nigh-impenetrable barrier...

“Explosion! Exploooooosion!”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That's it, Megumin, keep 'em coming! You are the world's strongest wizard!”

At that moment, though, one wild wizard was putting the *nigh* in *nigh-impenetrable*.

“Check it out, Darkness! Is this great or what? The Demon King's army has caused me an awful lot of grief, and I'm finally getting my revenge! Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Demon King—pfft, whatever! How do you like *them* apples?”

“Oh... Ohhh... One manatite worth enough to buy an entire house, two manatite worth enough to buy an entire house...” Darkness seemed to get paler every time Megumin unleashed her spell.

“Explosion! Explosion!” Megumin's ecstatic voice echoed around the field, while her outrageously powerful explosions continued to batter the Demon King's castle.

“Look!” I cried. “The Demon King's handpicked troops are running away crying like babies! The strongest enemies we could possibly face

are like pathetic kobolds before us!”

“Ahhhhh... Ohhhh...”

Not long before, Megumin, her eyes brimming with tears at the mana-crystal blessing before her, had unleashed her explosive attack. And now, as the third wave of blasts impacted the barrier, the Demon King’s troops started rushing out of the castle, practically frothing at the mouth. Dark Knights in pitch-black armor appeared with all haste, along with a wizard-looking guy in a robe the color of night and some sort of winged-gargoyle thing.

I could tell at a glance that each of them would have been powerful enough to give us a serious headache all by themselves. Normally, we would have run away from them as fast as we could—and now they were running toward us, racing past the barrier and heading in our direction explosion.

The gargoyle tried to lead an air assault of winged monsters, but Megumin just pointed one of her spells toward the sky, and then it was raining gargoyle dust.

“Exploooooosion! Exploooooosion!”

Megumin had skipped actually doing the incantation for her spell today, like she had during her showdown with Wolbach, one of the generals of the Demon King. An incantation normally serves to stabilize a magic spell’s power and make it easier to control. An incantation would both increase the power of the explosion and keep the magic from blowing up on us. But Megumin had arrived at utter mastery of explosion magic and no longer needed incantations to do whatever she wanted with the spell.

It only made sense. After all, this Arch-wizard had devoted herself heart and soul to Explosion...

“Explosion! Explosion! Exploooooosionnn!”

It was the only spell she had ever cast in her entire life.

Her magic could take out gods and demons, so the elite troops who came out of the Demon King’s castle didn’t even leave bodies behind. Darkness was pale and shaking as she watched Megumin’s display. “Th-this is hell... It’s hell on earth...! I know it’s only because there’s so much manatite around, but if the king or the nobility saw this, they would label Megumin the most dangerous person alive...! The state would have to get involved...!”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! God, does this feel good! I don’t feel the least bit depressed now! Keep at it, Megumin! Blow through that barrier and then drop a few more explosions on that castle! Aqua and the

others only just went in. And you know the Demon King's room has to be on the top floor. When the barrier comes down, just raise your trajectory and wipe out the top part of the castle!"

"Nooo, stop! Knowing Aqua's luck, she'll be right in the middle of your explosion! And look at Megumin's eyes—they're a purer red than I've ever seen!"

Not only were Megumin's eyes shining red, there were little crackles of blue-white electricity all around her. Was that from casting such a powerful spell so many times in a row?

The barrier around the castle was beginning to buckle under the relentless assault of powerful magic; even the untrained eye could see it. Little cracks were appearing in the semitransparent surface, and it looked like it might give way at any moment.

"*Exploooooosion! Exploooooosion!*" Megumin kept unleashing her brutal spell, and monsters kept popping out of the castle like balls from a *gachapon* machine. I don't think they were exactly eager to die an instantaneous, ignoble death, but they knew that if they didn't do something, that barrier was coming down.

While Megumin was briefly distracted by the oncoming troops, some wizardy-looking guys behind the barrier were waving their hands frantically. I assumed they were trying to repair the barrier, but I could see—with my Second Sight skill—that they looked desperate, like they might just burst into tears.

Meanwhile, the Dark Knights who seemed like the elite of the elite found their numbers severely depleted, leaving only some anguished-looking Japanese-style *oni* demons to come rushing out at us. They were all blown away.

Finally, the area around the castle was pockmarked with scores of giant craters. And the Demon King's troops stopped rushing madly out at us. Maybe there weren't any left...

That was when a wizard appeared, wearing a white mask, practically oozing power.

His robe and his staff were as white as his mask. He was obviously on a different level from the small fry we'd been dealing with. He seemed oddly...pure for a member of the Demon King's army. Almost holy...

"I see someone has come out. I wonder if this is the alleged 'world's strongest wizard.'" Megumin, her cheeks flushed and her eyes redder than ever before, stopped and watched the wizard emerge from the castle. She caressed a piece of manatite with glee; she was still buried practically to the waist in the stuff. Seeing that the barrage of explosions had abated, White Robe walked past the barrier, heading

leisurely in our direction. A semitranslucent shell seemed to cover him, and he had those white robes that just screamed Big Trouble.

He was still too far away from us to have a conversation. I assumed he had come out to ascertain who exactly we were and what we wanted. Then again, maybe he saw that Megumin was more powerful than anyone he'd ever encountered before and had emerged to throw down with her for the title of strongest. Or maybe...

Right at that moment, with no hesitation whatsoever, Megumin unleashed her spell.

“Exploooooosion!”

““Hey, hold it!”” Darkness and I cried, but obviously it was too late to stop the spell that erupted from her staff, spearing toward White Robe. A second later, there was a huge blast and a massive boom.

When the smoke cleared, we could see a man collapsed on the ground in the middle of a crater—now naked, his mask and white robe blown away by the spell. We could see white wings on his exposed back. Was he some kind of angel monster? Like the “fallen angel” Duke who Wiz had exploded out of existence?

We watched from a distance as, trembling, the naked angel got to his feet.

““Oooh!”” Darkness and I were both very impressed to see he'd survived Megumin's explosion. He really must be the guard they called the world's strongest wizard. The naked angel, still not very steady on his feet, faced our plateau and looked up.

“My...n...! Str...f the Demon King's...! How dare...!”

He was shouting something, but he was too far away to really hear what it was. It was probably, you know: *My name is So-and-So. How dare you blow me up, etc.*

Megumin and Darkness looked at each other, perplexed, evidently unable to hear him, either. In an effort to figure out what he wanted, I combined my Second Sight and Lip Reading skills.

“If you can hear me, give me a sign! Who or what are you? Are you adventurers?! To attack the castle directly from such a distance—have you never heard of the legend of the Demon King and the Hero? Or even common decency? Confronted with such base and foul deeds, the blood of the Clan of the Gods that runs through my veins—”

My skills allowed me to understand what the naked angel was saying but not to, you know, actually *make sense of it*.

“What’s with him? Do you know what he’s saying?” Megumin asked.

“I used my Lip Reading skill, yeah. I guess he thinks it was unfair of us to attack the castle from a distance. Like, super unfair.”

“Kind of childish logic for someone who’s supposedly the strongest wizard in the world... Although it’s true I’ve never heard of anyone defeating a Demon King quite like this...” Darkness looked conflicted.

Megumin gave a shake of her staff. “Whatever. Can I blow him up?”

“Be my guest. We’ve got the range on him. We don’t have to stand here and listen to him.”

“G-gee, I kind of feel bad for him...,” Darkness mumbled.

Megumin was more patient this time—she started chanting, the way you’re supposed to. She wasn’t going to drop a whole series of explosions on him, but she was going to make it powerful enough to do this in one shot.

“You have been warned! Behold my power! With infinite magical energy drawn from the demon realm and versed in every form of magic known to man, I shall take aim at you and—”

“Exploooooosion!” Megumin intoned before he could finish. The naked angel was blown into the sky mid-sentence. It took him a long time to come back down, and when he did, he hit the ground. Hard.

This time, the explosion seemed to do the trick: With a look of shock frozen on his face, the naked angel twitched a couple of times and stopped moving.

But then a complicated magical circle appeared beneath the angel’s body, shining with an intense light. As we watched, the wounds on his body began to heal themselves.

Come to think of it, we had heard something about him having powerful regenerative abilities. The wizards who had been repairing the barrier scurried out and tried to pull the naked angel back to safety.

Megumin thrust her staff out in front of her, watching them. “It seems they’ve taken refuge behind their barrier. Well, it matters not, for I shall destroy it in any case. And then we shall see who the strongest wizard truly is!”

“Exploooooosion! Exploooooosion!”

As Megumin continued going nuts with her spells, I read the lips of the guys behind the barriers.

“Aaahhhh! What do we do? What do we do now?!”

“This is it—we’re done for...!”

“Good gods! What in the hell is she?! Is she completely insane?!”

“The barrier’s not going to hold! If we don’t get out of here, that awful Crimson Magicker will blow us to smithereens!”

“Why would a last-boss type like her suddenly attack us? And how can she use so many explosions?! Is she a Demon King from some other world?!”

“M-Mommyyyy!”

While the Demon King’s mages were busy panicking, the naked angel groggily opened his eyes. When I saw that, I signaled to Megumin to stop firing for a moment.

The angel somehow managed to get to his feet—not very steadily—and the wizards put a cloak on him. I activated my Lip Reading skill again.

“W-with my...profound...power...s-such a pitiful...Crimson Magic Clan member...could...never...”

“He says that if he got really serious, he could OHKO the chestless wonder of a Crimson Magic Clanner up on that plateau.”

“Exploooooosion! Explooooooosion!”

My interpretation caused Megumin to resume her attack, until it was clear the barrier was about to give.

“K-Kazuma, is that true? Did he really say that?!” Darkness asked.

“More or less.”

The former general of the Demon King stood, wobbling a bit. I could see that his wounds really had healed up pretty well.

“A-ahem. We need that crazy Crimson wizard to run out of magic! She may outdistance us, but we only need to keep repairing the barrier! I can draw a limitless supply of MP from the demon realm! If we can force a contest of endurance, we need not even face that insane spell-caster directly!”

“““Right!””””

The cloaked angel, never knowing that I was listening in on his plans, raised his hands and got to work fixing the barrier.

“They say they’re just gonna wait for the crazy Crimson wizard to run out of magic. He’s all, *I’ve got unlimited MP; I don’t give two shits about some insane spell-caster, blah, blah, blah.* They’re going to keep repairing the barrier to draw out the fight.”

“He’s so dead.”

“Wait, Kazuma! Is that true?! Is that really how he said it?!”

“Pretty much.”

The cloaked angel and his wizards were desperately trying to repair the barrier...

Megumin’s eyes glowed a particularly sinister shade of red, and she took a deep breath...!

*“Explosion Explosion Explosion Explosion Explosion Explosion
Explosion Explosion Explosion Exploooooosion!”*

“W-wait... Wait!”

In the blink of an eye, Megumin’s rapid-fire volley of explosions demolished the barrier that had protected the Demon King’s castle for so many years. The enemy wizard was reduced from “cloaked angel” to “naked angel” again. He was shouting something, but...

*“Explosion Explosion Explosion Explosion Explosion Explosion
Explosion Exploooooosion!”*

...Megumin didn’t let up with the magical blasts, blowing away the other wizards around him and leaving the battered, naked angel in the center of a whole pile of craters. Maybe there really was something to this “strongest wizard in the world” stuff.



Megumin, almost looking impressed by the enemy's resilience, started a very long chant. There was another thrum of magical energy, but it was different from before. She wasn't drawing from the manatite this time. She'd saved her own MP for when she really wanted it, and now she was going to use it, summoning up every bit of magic she had. And *her* most powerful magic was even more potent than the stuff stored up in that super-high-quality manatite.

The angel found that even his healing powers were overwhelmed by the relentless string of explosions, and he was on the cusp of death. He could see the uncanny aura coming from Megumin, and he began to whimper: *"I am...the strongest...and longest-serving member...of the Demon King's army... And my name is..."*

He was trying to mumble out his name, but he never quite got there.

"Exploooooosssiiiiiooonnnn!"

Megumin's explosion spell, the most powerful she'd ever unleashed, slammed into him, and he disappeared before we ever learned his name.

2

"Awesome work! Man, that was one hell of a show. I don't think even Mobile Fortress Destroyer made things that hard, did it? Anyway, this certifies you as really and truly the world's strongest— H-hey, Megumin, you're bleeding."

"Huh? Oh..."

I was using Drain Touch to give her the absolute minimum amount of MP. Prompted by my remark, Megumin, her face flushed with excitement, rubbed the spot under her nose with the sleeve of her robe, but it just spread the blood around.

"Awww..." I used Create Water to wet a handkerchief, then dabbed at the mess. Maybe she liked the feeling of the cool, damp handkerchief, because she closed her eyes and let me wipe away the blood.

Man, she'd gotten so worked up that she'd started bleeding?

Wait... Could this be...?

"Megumin, your cheeks are really warm, too. What's going on here? This isn't just excitement, is it?!"

"I-it's quite all right; you needn't worry. But behold, now I shall take aim at the top floor of the Demon King's castle and—" Megumin,

clearly feverish, raised her staff weakly in the direction of the castle.

Darkness grabbed hold of her. "Explosion is the most powerful spell a person can use. How could it *not* cause weird side effects to use it so many times in a row? Using manatite involves drawing MP from the rock and cycling it through your body. It doesn't take too much of a toll on the average spell-caster, but..."

"But it might be too much for *Megumin's* body," I concluded.

"Please do not act as if this has happened because I am physically small! It's all right. I can keep going. In fact, you *must* let me keep going!"

I held the jabbering Megumin steady with one hand while I started gathering up the scattered manatite. I put it back in the backpack I'd brought it in, only to find Megumin weaving her arm through mine.

"Stoppit, no more explosions today," I said. "And *I'll* carry the bag of manatite. Don't fight me about this."

"Say what you will, but if we find ourselves in trouble, I won't hesitate to use explosion magic again. Also, as the manatite is a gift I received from you, *I* shall carry it."

Pushy, pushy...

In the end, I caved to Megumin, as long as she agreed that she would use her magic only when it was absolutely necessary. She'd used up most of the manatite, making the backpack a lot lighter, so I was a bit concerned about the way she wobbled under its weight all the same.

But anyway, with that, the biggest obstacle to us getting into the Demon King's castle was finally out of the way. We started toward it. I made sure my Sense Foe skill was active, but it was completely silent all around. We were totally exposed as we worked our way across the field, but no attacks came from the castle, maybe a sign of just how chaotic things were inside.

"Okay, showtime. Everybody ready?"

"Yeah, just leave this to me. I don't care if we run into a dragon. I won't retreat a single step. It's killing me to let Megumin have all the glory." Darkness, who scarcely looked different from the Dark Knights we'd defeated earlier, was raring to go.

"Heh-heh-heh! I believe the only deed that could outshine mine today would be the defeat of the Demon King, don't you think?"

"Damn...! A female knight's job is to be *captured* by the Demon King, but we've come here to kill him! Do I do my duty as a member of this party or as a female knight...?"

"I'm sorry, you two, but what do you think we came here to do? Have you forgotten about Aqua already?" I asked my two overexcited companions. I approached the gate, keeping my skills active. I didn't

sense any foes, so I went ahead and just walked through. And that was when it happened.

“Ahhh!”

“Whaaa—?!”

Someone shouted in total astonishment, and I cried out, too, every bit as surprised as they were.

Then several familiar figures appeared in front of us. Namely...

“Megumin! Waaaaah! Megumin, Megumin!! I was s-s-scared! I was so, so scared!”

“N-now, what is the matter, Yunyun? I know you cry quite frequently, but you look even worse than usual today!”

It was Yunyun, along with Mitsurugi and his party.



“Kazuma Satou, you were able to follow me? Frankly, I’m amazed you’re alive. Wasn’t that the Demon King outside?!” Mitsurugi, with a young woman hanging off each arm, sounded pretty shocked. His girlfriends must have run into something really frightening, because they were clinging to him tighter than usual, tears in their eyes, and mumbling something about the Demon King over and over.

Wait...Demon King?

“Um, what would the Demon King be doing outside his own castle?”

Yunyun, finally getting herself under control after copious head-patting by Megumin, looked at me, puzzled, and explained: “W-we were able to break in here thanks to Miss Aqua, but right after, while we were searching the building concealed with magic, there was a whole series of mysterious explosions aimed right at the castle... Miss Aqua claimed that it had to be the Demon King himself, having realized that his mortal enemy, a goddess, had infiltrated his stronghold. She said he was trying to destroy us right along with the building, and she made a mad dash for the exit...”

Darkness and I looked at our “Demon King.” The red-eyed, manatite-carrying archfiend refused to meet our eyes.

Hey! That reminded me!

“You mentioned Aqua! Where is she anyway?” We’d *actually* managed to join up with everybody, but the one person we were looking for wasn’t here.

“O-oh, uh—!” Yunyun, an apologetic look on her face, started to explain, but Mitsurugi interrupted her.

“Lady Aqua, *ahem*... We sort of lost track of her. What with all the confusion caused by the explosions and everything... We got this far using Yunyun’s concealment magic and my Ambush skill, and I’m pretty sure she must still be nearby someplace. She was with us until just a moment ago. I took my eyes off her for one second...”

And one second, it turned out, was all it took for her to cause trouble. How could she get lost when they were all supposed to be running away *together*?

“I’m really sorry... After I acted so condescending to you, I wasn’t able to protect Lady Aqua, either... Damn! Some Hero of the Enchanted Blade I am! I can’t even look after a single loved one—!”

“Listen, sorry to interrupt you in the middle of your tragic monologue but getting lost is kind of her thing. Happens all the time. Don’t let it get to you. We can figure out what Important Lessons to take from this later. Right now, we have to find that moron.”

I couldn’t have Mitsurugi moping around forever, and I also knew that if Aqua bumped into the soldiers of the Demon King’s army all by

herself, she would be down and out on the spot. And with her luck, I was sure she *would* bump into them. Meaning time was of the essence...

As soon as we stepped inside the castle, we conferred with Mitsurugi and his party about what we would do next. "I hate to split up in an emergency, but I think that's what we should do to find Aqua," I said. "If you bump into any enemies, shout, and Mitsurugi or Yunyun can run to you and take care of them. Not to brag, but I think you can assume that my group and I won't be any help at all in battle."

"W-well, okay. Considering you're willing to be so blunt about it, I won't plan on counting on you too much. If anything comes up, just call me."

I instructed Megumin and Darkness not to get too far away to shout for either Yunyun or Mitsurugi; then I activated Sense Foe, and we started searching.

I still had misgivings about getting into any fights, but lone-wolf infiltration—that, I could do. I stealthily slipped away from where everyone else was searching and tried to think of places Aqua seemed likely to go.

I don't see any enemies around here...

Most of the guys on the first floor seemed to have been done in by Megumin's explosions. That meant that with my ability to detect traps and enemies, plus Ambush, I would probably be safe going a little farther.

"Let us head this way, Darkness. Knowing Aqua, she must have been terrified of running into enemies and gone somewhere dark where they wouldn't be able to see her."

"No, she was running away with Yunyun, wasn't she? But she *is* a scaredy-cat, so I'm sure she went to the widest hallway in hopes that we would find her right away..."

That was Megumin and Darkness, somewhere behind me as I scanned the inside of the castle. It was built almost like a dungeon. There were lights along the walls here and there, and the hallways were a confusing mess, maybe to discourage intruders. I'd expected the Demon King's castle to be a little more...you know...creepy, but despite its imposing exterior, the inside was relatively clean. Heck, maybe even demons and devils didn't want to live in a grimy old castle.

As I looked around, I noticed something strange.

At the end of a dead-end hallway was a piece of paper that said *Don't Push*. It hung right by some kind of magic circle, and there was a button beside it.

What was going on? If this was a trap, it was a little too obvious. I activated my Detect Trap skill just to be sure, and lo and behold, the skill alerted me that yes, it was a trap. That didn't tell me exactly what kind of trap it was, however. I happened to possess the Disarm Trap ability, but I'd never used it since Chris had taught it to me on my very first dungeon dive, so I wasn't confident I could make it work.

But, hey. If it was a trap, all I had to do was not touch it.

That was when a light bulb flickered to life in my brain.

Was it really a trap? I mean, what kind of idiot would make it so blatantly obvious?

So was it some kind of camouflage, then, to hide something? Maybe it was a teleporter that took you straight to the Demon King's chamber. Having a teleporter right by the gate would be a great plan just in case the king ever needed to make a hasty escape...

The Detect Trap skill activated, meaning there was definitely a real trap at work here. But maybe that only meant they'd set another, very small trap on it. Something to keep the teleporter hidden. After all, it wasn't only deadly traps that set off the detection ability. Like, maybe you went through the teleporter and a blackboard eraser immediately fell on your head. That would set off the Detect Trap skill.

The Demon King might be a demon, but he was also a king. Of course he would have an escape route ready in a pinch. And anyway, it wasn't like he spent every minute cooped up in this castle. Think about what a pain it would be to work your way through this maze, all the way to the top floor, every time you came home and just wanted to kick back in your own room. No, this was definitely a secret passageway (or teleporter or whatever).

The Demon King was supposed to be getting up there in years, right? I could say with confidence that this was no trap!

"Heh! You might fool those other idiots, but *I* know what I'm really seeing here..."

With that, I stepped into the magic circle and pressed the button that the paper said not to press.

Oh, crap. I'd been so pumped up about my own discovery that I'd forgotten I probably should've called to the others first.

Oh well. If my guess was right, it wouldn't matter anyway. Once I was sure where this thing went, I would just pop right back...!

In the blink of an eye, the scenery around me changed. Now I was in a small, dark, funny-smelling room. There was hardly any light in there; it felt like a ghost might pop out at any moment. And I thought I could hear a woman weeping nearby...!

"Shoot! It was a trap!" I exclaimed.

"Waaaaahhh!" My exclamation was met with a very familiar yell from a corner of the dim chamber.

Hold on...

"Aqua?"

"Wha...? Kazuma...?"

There in the corner of the room, with tears in her eyes, hugging her knees, and making herself as small as possible, was Aqua. For a second, she looked bewildered, but then her face screwed up, and she said, "K-Kazuma! Waaaahhh! Kazuma, Kazuma, oh, Kazuma!" She jumped up, obviously deeply moved. She must have been frightened just about out of her skull here, because she flung herself at my chest, tears and all.

With my inborn Luck and my Auto-evade skill, I neatly dodged Aqua's would-be hug.

3

"Waaaahhh! Bwaaahhh! Aaahhhhhh!"

"I'm sorry, okay?! It's not my fault! That skill has a chance of activating on its own! Come on—I said I was sorry, so stop crying!"

Thanks to my dodge, Aqua had gone headfirst into the wall, and she still hadn't stopped bawling about it. She got hurt way worse than this most of the time, so why was she crying now?

Well... To be fair, I guess if the same thing happened to me, I would cry, too.

"Hey, pipe down already. This is the Demon King's castle! If you cry too loud, we'll end up with his minions all over us!"

"But! But! I finally see you again, Kazuma, and you... You...!"

Oh, for God's sake!

"Here, show me where you got hurt. I'll fix it up. *Heal!*" I put my hand to the bump on Aqua's head and cast my healing magic. It must have worked, because she instantly stopped crying. In fact, her eyes were open wide...

"Y-you healed me... Kazuma, you used Heal...! Ah... Ahhhh...!"

Waaaaah! You stupid NEET! You've finally come to steal my very identity, haven't you?! It wasn't enough for you to make fun of me and call me the goddess of toilets; now you want to take away my one defining trait?! Fine, come at me, you thieving NEET! It turns out my *real* enemy wasn't the Demon King at all—it was you! Well, let's settle this right now!"

"Give it a rest!" I exclaimed. Aqua had her dukes up, but I was ready to give her a piece of my mind. "While you were having a nice little walk, I was working my ass off! You left your dumb little letter just *begging* us to come after you, and then you disappeared—I've never known a woman who caused as much trouble as you!"

"Dumb little letter? A woman who causes trouble? Ooh, you're angling for some real divine punishment, mister...! You're going to regret provoking the wrath of the goddess of water! I'll punish you by causing the shower to stop working when and only when you're trying to wash your hair!"

"You always come up with the stupidest punishments! That's why — Hey, hold on!" When I heard footsteps in the distance, I activated a certain skill.

"I swear I heard a woman's voice."

"You're making that up. This is the upper level. The intruders are supposed to be bumbling around on the first floor, remember?"

A conversation accompanied the footsteps, and by using the Eavesdrop skill (which belonged to a unique class called the Darkstalker), I could hear what they were saying. The person who'd taught me the skill had informed me (really, boasted to me) that despite the name "-stalker," the class was basically an assassin, which, I was assured, was much cooler.

Aqua, who had no idea that I'd learned this skill, said, "What's going on? What's with the weird look all of a sudden? Are you saying you want to have a face-making contest with me? I may be a dedicated performer, but I admit I'm hesitant to do anything that would impugn my image as a beautiful goddess..."

"Nobody's suggesting a stupid contest like that! And I'm not making a weird face; I'm trying to be serious! A couple of the Demon King's lackeys are coming this way! C'mon—we've gotta hide!"

In a moderate panic, Aqua and I looked for somewhere to conceal ourselves in the dark room.

"That reminds me. What are you even doing here? Did you press that button, too?" I said.

"Of course I did! Who wouldn't want to press a button that says *Don't Push*? It was impossible to resist such a devious trap! Which means I'm sure that enchanted-sword guy and everyone else will be right behind us."

“You’re right. It’s frightening how that trap plays on human psychology. I’m sure the others will fall for it the same way we did. But that means we just have to buy time until they get here... We just need someplace to...hide... Ooh!”

““Pot spotted!””

Aqua and I both noticed a jar, big enough for one person to hide in. At the exact same time, we both put a hand on it.

“Hey, I saw it first,” Aqua said. “Find your own hiding place!”

“*You* find somewhere else to hide! ...Hey!” When I opened the jar, it turned out there was water inside. I guess this was where they stored their drinking water.

Aqua chuckled in triumph and held up her hair. “Well, well, it looks like I’m the only one who can hide here. Only a beautiful goddess, capable of breathing underwater, could—”

“Man, what a rip-off.” Annoyed by Aqua’s obvious satisfaction, I kicked the jar over.

“Nooo!”

The jar broke with a crash, sending water everywhere.

“*Did you hear a sound just now?! I knew it! There’s someone here!*”

“*There! It came from that room over there!*”

The Demon King’s minions, drawn by the noise, were so close now that I hardly needed a special skill to hear what they were saying.

“What are you doing?! What’s *wrong* with you?!” Aqua demanded.

“Shoot! Even I know that was a mistake! It’s just been so long since I got a chance to quip at you that I didn’t think...!”

“Sometimes I don’t know whether you’re an idiot or a genius, Kazuma! But oh noooo! What do we do? They’re gonna find us!”

“Who’s there? Come out!” someone shouted, flinging the door open with a crash. Aqua and I ducked into a corner, trying to make ourselves as small as possible. Aqua had a death grip on my arm—probably trying to make extra sure my Ambush skill extended to her—and she was clinging to me like her life depended on it.

The room might have been gloomy, but Aqua and I could both see in the dark, so we got a good look at the lackeys who came through the door. One was a knight in pitch-black armor; the other was a crimson *oni* with two horns on his head who must have been at least two meters tall.

They looked around the room...

“Huh. Nobody here.”

“Grrr, that’s weird. How can there be no one here?”

But then, from behind them...

<No, someone is certainly here. Someone who shines disgustingly, depressingly bright. She's right...there! >

Behind them, a semitranslucent ghost in a rotting robe spoke telepathically, directly into our minds, and then pointed right at Aqua.

"You're an undead, a wraith at that, and yet you dare call *me* depressing? You've got some nerve! I'm going to purify you so hard, there won't be so much as a wisp of you left!" Aqua danced out of the corner of the room, pointing right back at the wraith.

"Dammit, I *knew* something would happen the moment I found you!" I followed her, drawing the magic sword Dust had lent me.

"Intruders! I knew it! Hurry up and call reinforcements— Hey, hang on a second. Do these two look ridiculously weak to you?"

"Um, yeah, I guess we could handle 'em on our own. How about it? Are we gonna handle 'em?"

<Gah! Just, someone else, please take care of that woman! My every instinct is telling me someone like her has to be my mortal enemy! >

Let the minions blather on. I leveled my sword at them and said, "Aqua, I'm counting on you for support! Just let me handle the vanguard! I think you'll see I've learned a few tricks since we saw each other last. My power has awakened!"

"Whoooo! Kazuma, you're so cool! Say, Kazuma, do you need a buff that makes you an amazing performer?"

"Give it to me! That's a great one!" I said, getting ready for battle.

The Demon King's minions lined up across from me. "G-gosh, these intruders don't seem very worried about us..."

"We'll show them! There are only two of 'em! Let's tear 'em apart!"

<Uh, I'm starting to fade away just getting close to that woman! >

As Aqua buffed me, she was...smiling for some reason.

"Hey, Kazuma, I wonder what's going on. We're in another tight spot, and I know that really isn't a good thing, but for some reason, I'm having a lot of fun!"

"Dammit, me too! What's happening? I hate this! But for some reason I'm really relieved to feel like things are back to normal!"

Then the battle began!

Buffered and ready, I stood with Aqua at my back. “Aqua, you’re on that wraith over there!”

“Got it! Ha-ha-ha! Woe betide the undead who appears in front of me! What shall I do with you? There are so many ways I could torment a pitiful wraith!”

<H-hey, this lady is terrifying for some reason! She’s bad news, she’s trouble, she’s a walking disaster! Sorry, guys, but do you mind if I get out of here?!>

So there we were in the middle of the Demon King’s castle—we didn’t even know exactly where—and Aqua was intimidating a wraith.

“All right, Payne, let’s trade opponents, then! You and I can take on this weak-ass kid! Nos, you handle the lady who’s got Payne freaking out!”

“I’m on her! Feel free to hide behind us, Payne!”

<Whatever! That weak little snot has my name written all over him! Hey, kid, you better get ready, ’cause physical attacks don’t work on me!>

It was the *oni*-like monster across from me giving the orders. The knight-type monster edged closer to Aqua, while the *oni* and the wraith closed distance with me, looking threatening. I didn’t like where this was going...

“Kazuma! This is the perfect time for...you know! Your killer trump card!”

“My killer *what*?! What’s ‘you know,’ and why the hell are you bringing it up now?! I know I talked up my awakening and stuff...but is there really some secret power within me that’s going to show up right in our moment of greatest need?!”

<““?!””>

The monsters stopped, worried about what “you know” might be.

“No! Kazuma, you’re completely, totally, and remarkably ordinary! I mean... *You* know! You have it for moments just like this, don’t you?!” I glanced back over my shoulder to find Aqua holding her pointer and middle fingers under her eyes.



Ah! That's it!

"I gotcha! Take this— *Flash!*"

""Hngh?!""

"Eeeek!"

Flash was a magical spell that produced a blinding light, and I never made the same mistake twice. I held my left hand over my eyes as I sent the knight and *oni* reeling with a blast of light.

"Grrr! Damn! Stupid kid!"

"D-dirty little trick...!"

It worked great on those two, but—

< Ha! That won't work on me! I don't rely on eyeballs to see! >

"Yeah, but so what?" I crowed at the wraith. "Now your little friends can't move, and before they get their vision back, you're gonna be gone from this world! Aqua, you're up! Do it!"

"K-Kazuma... Kazuma... Where *are* you?!"

I guess the spell had blinded Aqua along with the monsters.

"You're the one who told me to blind them! Why'd you let it blind you, too?!"

"How was I supposed to know you'd learned a spell like that? When I said 'you know,' I was thinking of that obnoxious thing you do with your *Earth* this and *Breath* that!" Aqua, her eyes still closed, stumbled around, flailing until she managed to grab hold of my clothes.

Now it was the wraith's turn to sound triumphant. < Bad luck for you, brother! I told you physical attacks don't work on me, which means your chance of beating me is one in, like, a gazillion! Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! > The ghost's pale face twisted with pleasure, and then he flung out his hands toward me. His ghostly arms bent in impossible directions, but just before his fingers touched me—

"N-nice try!" I hooked Aqua in front of me, using her like a shield.

"< Eeeek?! > " they cried together.

If the wraith said he was starting to vanish just by getting near Aqua, then actually touching her must have been awfully painful for him.

"Hey, Kazuma, what was that just now?! I felt something really, really cold!" Aqua exclaimed, her eyes still closed.

< This guy's a monster! Using his friend as a shield! Dammit, now my arm's gone! > The wraith wept, looking at where his right arm had been.

"P-Payne, how's it going over there? We know the lady's your natural enemy, but you can at least take out the guy, right?!" The

knight shouted, facing completely the other direction from the wraith.
<I s-sure thought so! Nos, Logia, hurry up and heal me!>

Ah-ha-ha. Now I know all their names.

Payne was the wraith, Nos was the knight, and Logia was the *oni*.
And at the moment, Nos and Logia still couldn't see.

Nos had his sword out and ready—and Logia was stumbling right past him, trying to turn around.

You're mine now!

"Nos, he's right there! The guy is right in front of your face! Finish him!"

"Got it!"

"Eeeeyaaarrrrrghhh!"

I used the Performer buff to imitate Payne's voice and cause Nos to stab Logia.

"How's that? Did I get him?!"

<You didn't get him, Nos! You just cut down Logia! This is awful... And you, you're nuts! How can you imitate my voice so perfectly when we've just met?!> Payne demanded, sticking close to the slumped-over Logia.

"Oh no! I cut down Logia?! Wh-wh-what's that supposed to mean? Payne, tell me what's going on!" Nos said, shaking uncontrollably. He could tell something was very, very wrong.

<The guy mimicked my voice! Just wait right there until you can see again, Nos; don't move a muscle! Even I wouldn't be able to withstand a cut from that enchanted sword of yours!>

"Y-yeah, I gotcha! I'll just stand right here!" Nos said and stopped moving.

As for me, I made sure my throat was in good working order and then said, "Ha, that's perfect! Yeesh! You've always been a thorn in my side, muscle-brain! You were never the sharpest tool in the shed, but I can't believe you've found a way to make my life hard even at a moment like this!"

"P-P-P-Payne?! Is that r-r-r-really how you feel about me?!"

<N-n-no, it's not! It was the guy who said that just now! Dammit, what are you smirking about? I'll kill you!> Payne, enraged, came to attack me, although he had to be careful of Aqua, whom I was still using as a shield. In fact, he was paying complete attention to her—but I had a magical weapon of my own!

"Eat this, you sonofa—!"

<Yooow! Y-you carry an enchanted sword?! Damn! You looked so weak; I never expected you to have equipment that sweet. But if it comes to melee combat, you're all mine! Try this on for size—the ultimate undead technique, Drain Touch! >

“Yikes!”

While Nos and Aqua focused on recovering their vision, Payne and I were really duking it out. I stabbed him with the enchanted sword Dust had loaned me, but he reached out and touched me, draining my life away.

“Shit! Get away from me, you...! *Heal! Heal!*”

<Eeeeyow-ow-ow-ow! G-geez, you even know healing magic?! Whatever, doesn't matter. Too bad your weak-ass sword swinging and half-baked healing magic will never be enough to compensate for all the life I'm draining out of you! >

This was bad. I was starting to feel faint. I tried to make use of my anti-undead shield, but Payne and my shield were both fighting me now, so it wasn't going very well.

Instead, I plunged my left hand into Payne's transparent body.

<What do you think you're— Hyaaarrrghhh! Y-y-you're human! Why can you use Drain Touch?! Stop it, you bastard! Stop it right now! I'm gonna disappear! >

I was trying to steal Payne's strength with Drain Touch, but he wasn't in the mood to give up and started draining me right back. The MP I got from his spectral body was chilly and sort of gave me the heebie-jeebies. I had the feeling that draining an undead was probably terrible for my health. Now I understood why Wiz had been so unwilling to absorb MP from monsters. I'd drained Aqua and Megumin before, but this was something else entirely...

<Gaaah! My body! H-hey, why do you look so...so weirded out?! >

“I'm not exactly thrilled to be draining MP from a wraith! Draining a gorgeous wizard girl was a lot more fulfilling!”

<Draining a gorgeous wizard girl?! G-gods, I'm so jealous...! I know exactly how you feel, and if we'd met under any other circumstances, I'd have loved to have had a chat about the philosophy of draining with you... But we're enemies, and I guess we'd better settle this, human! >

Geez, listen to him... If he weren't a wraith, maybe I could have sat down for a drink with him...!

<I'm gonna show you a serious Drain Touch...! >

“*God Blow!*” Just as we were about to see which of us was the better Drain Toucher, Aqua smashed Payne out of existence. “And *that's* what undead are worth against me. How about that? How was I?”

“D-dammit, you’ll never, ever learn to read a room, will you?”

Aqua kept looking at me, hoping I would compliment her fighting, but now wasn’t the time.

“Y-you bastards... How dare you...!”

Nos, who’d gotten his sight back just like Aqua, took a step forward, his heavy armor rattling. I held up my sword for form’s sake, but I didn’t think my pitiful attacks were going to do much against armor like that.

“Hey, Aqua, would you listen to this guy? He cut down his own friend with a malicious sneak attack, and now he thinks he’s the protagonist of some revenge story!”

“I guess that’s what makes him a knight of the Demon King’s army. He doesn’t feel shame no matter how awful or cruel or mean he is.”

“Y-you were the one who made me kill my friend!”

We’d succeeded in getting him to lose his cool, but he proved that he belonged here at the castle. Even enraged, I didn’t see any openings. I didn’t have a lot of hope that I was going to find a gap in the armor of a knight, a guy who specialized in swordsmanship. But I wouldn’t be able to activate Drain Touch, either, because I couldn’t touch his body.

And then, without warning, Nos attacked!

“D-dodge!” My Luck saved my neck, Auto-evade activating and allowing me to get away from his blow.

“Hrm? Well, you know how to move—I’ll give you that. I never expected you to avoid me so readily...”

This was bad, though. I’ll be honest: I hadn’t even been able to see his sword. He was exactly the sort of knight you’d expect to find in the last dungeon. I wasn’t going to be going toe to toe with him.

As a lifelong gamer, though, I knew that these meathead types were always weak to magic. It had been ever thus: in old games and recent, Western and Japanese titles alike.

“*Lightning!*”

“?! ”

I intoned some intermediate magic and thrust my left hand in Nos’s direction. A bolt of blue-white lightning flashed out as if connecting us. Nos shook violently and dropped his sword.

“W-wow, Kazuma, you really do have a whole new arsenal of skills! You just overpowered an enemy coming straight at you, like the hero of a story or something! I can hardly believe it!”

“H-hey, shut up! Even I have my moments!”

While Aqua was busy jabbering about whatever, Nos picked his

weapon back up.

“Sorry to burst your bubble,” he said, “but I was just startled. That lightning bolt only kind of tickled.”

“Ignore him! Don’t listen to him, Kazuma! Although honestly, I do feel a little relieved!”

“I said, shut up! What’s with both of you dogpiling on me? I was hoping to conserve my MP, but I think it’s time to play my trump card!”

““?!””

Nos held his sword squarely in front of him, sinking down into a fighting posture. Aqua was watching with bated breath from behind, but I knew it was going to be all right. She didn’t have to worry.

When it came to opponents with low Magic Resistance, I had the perfect killer move!

“I wonder what it is. Is it a beam? Is he finally going to shoot a beam?!”

Okay, so she may have been on tenterhooks, but I guess Aqua wasn’t especially worried.

She watched expectantly as I started to mumble a magic incantation to myself. Nos sank his stance even lower. “I don’t know what you think you’re going to do, but the second you cast a spell, I’ll put a hole in your belly. I’ll even tell you how I’m going to do it: a thrust! I’ll stab clean through you *and* the lady behind you. Dodge me again, and the girl’s dead, got it?”

“You heard the man! Aqua, dodge like your life depends on it!”

“Uh, does that mean you plan to get out of his way?! You’re not going to use yourself as a shield to protect a vulnerable, gorgeous goddess?!”

With my incantation finished and ready to cast my spell at any moment, I watched Nos’s movements like a hawk. It was really annoying, the way Aqua was clinging to the back of my shirt. Was she hoping to use me as a shield if it came down to it?

I mean, using your own party member as a shield—that was inhuman. Or in-goddess or whatever.

Hold on... Was she trying to get me back for using her against the wraith?

“Who are you people anyway? Where did you crawl in from? We only heard the barrier was brought down a few minutes ago. And you’d have to have some pretty serious strength to even reach the top level here. You know, I think I remember the trap team setting up some ridiculous teleporter that goes straight to this room as a... joke...” Nos, who’d been muttering to himself, his grip on his sword growing less and less steady, suddenly looked straight at us. “D-don’t tell me... You didn’t get caught in that stupid trap, did you?!”

“H-h-hell no, we didn’t get *caught*! I knew it was a trap! And I knew it had to be the quickest way to the Demon King’s chamber, so I deliberately tripped it!”

“Y-yeah, me too! I definitely knew that it was a trap right away, at least! My unclouded vision discerned that this was the shortest path!”

Nos sighed to himself. “I didn’t think that ridiculous trap would ever—”

“That’s enough out of you! Take this!” I cried, unleashing my spell. Nos’s reaction was instantaneous: He charged at us with his sword.

Shit! I thought I’d caught him off guard, but he had better reactions than I’d expected!

Normally, it wouldn’t have mattered what spell I’d used. But the trump card I’d played was...

“*Teleport!*”

“Grrr! Heh, Teleport, huh? Too bad for you Teleport doesn’t work on m—”

Nos stood there with his arm stretched out, as if he was stabbing with a sword. But his sword had been magically teleported away. For some reason, though, the armor was still there—and it fell noisily to the ground.

“Kazuma, you even know Teleport?! You really did have a trump card up your sleeve! Hey, where’d you send that guy anyway?”

“Axel police station.”

I currently had two registered Teleport destinations, both set up before we’d left for the castle: right outside the Axel police station and the lowest level of the dungeon I’d visited with Vanir and Wiz. Maybe I could have sent Nos to the dungeon just as well as the police station, but I’d promised Vanir that when I got back, we would go collect the rest of the treasure from the dungeon. If there was a knight waiting right there, he might kill me the moment we teleported in. So I went with the police station just to be safe.

“You’re going to reduce the poor patrolmen to tears, sending them a villain like that.”

“What’s state power for if not to help out when you’re in a bind? These are people who deal with Axel’s street punks and unruly adventurers. I think they can handle a monster. Heh! And now you see what happens to anyone who tries to get in my face now that I’ve awakened!”

I grinned broadly, and Aqua looked at me, her eyes shining. “It’s so wonderful to see you relying on others to solve your problems again! I knew you just weren’t Kazuma if you didn’t act like a pathetic

weakling!”

“Ha-ha-ha, you joker! If you make too much fun of me, I’ll teleport home on my own!”

“Hee-hee! Kazuma, you’re a barrel of laughs! Pffft-hee-hee-hee! Uh... You *are* joking, aren’t you? That was a joke, right?!”

I ignored Aqua, taking a fresh look at our room. The only things around were the corpse of the *oni* who’d been cut down by the very friend he trusted (you did have to feel a little bad) and the pile of armor formerly worn by Nos.

“I wonder why I couldn’t teleport his armor...,” I said.

“If I had to guess, I’d say the guy you teleported had weak Magic Resistance. You remember that Dullahan from way back? He had armor that protected him from holy magic, right? And if you can’t resist magical teleportation, you might be sent who knows where and even killed the moment you show up at your destination. It would have been enough for his armor to interfere with Teleport, but he probably got carried away and got armor that actually *couldn’t* be teleported instead.”

.....

“Okay, that explains the armor, but what’s that mean? The guy inside still got teleported? I might call that a pretty serious product flaw.”

“Hey, don’t ask me. It seems like the sort of thing a muscle-brained knight would come up with.”

Geez. So he’d been all confident that Teleport wouldn’t have any effect on him, and now he was standing outside the police station... buck naked.

If we were all lucky, he was at least wearing some sort of clothes under his armor...

“I thought maybe my trump card wasn’t working right, but if this is how it’s supposed to work, then that’s fine. Anyway, how about we hunker down here and wait for the others to show up?”

“Good idea. A trap like that, they should be right behind us.”

She was right. The trap had even succeeded in catching her and me. The others would come sooner rather than later.

Aqua and I settled in to wait, sure that the rest of the group would be joining us soon...

Chapter 2

Good Luck for This Goddess!

1

““They’re not coming.””

I wasn’t even sure how long it had been since we’d gotten ourselves sent here. Aqua and I had been in a corner of the room, passing the time by playing children’s games, but there was no sign that anyone else was about to show up.

“What’s going on here?” I said, scratching my chin. “Does this mean not even one of them fell into that cunning trap? No, that’s ridiculous...”

Aqua nodded along. “It’s so cunning, maybe they didn’t even notice it. We’re talking about Megumin and Darkness here. Megumin only thinks about breaking things, and Darkness only thinks about running into things. They’re not exactly the brainiest pair.”

Ah, yes, that made sense.

“Well, this sucks. *They* get lost, and *we* have to work our way back to find them.”

“I guess so. Gosh, we take our eyes off them for one second and they practically disappear. They really can’t survive without me, can they?”

Considering that we were separated from the others, we could say whatever we wanted about them, just between the two of us.

Guess we can’t hang out here forever, though.

But how were we supposed to find the others again? I glanced around the room, but there was nothing that looked like it would teleport us back to our starting point. Nos had said this was the highest floor. In other words, that teleporter had sent us to the final part of the last dungeon.

“Hey, Aqua... Which is better? The two of us searching blindly around the Demon King’s dangerous, deadly castle all by ourselves? Or just teleporting straight home?”

“I vote for teleporting home.”

It was nice to know we were on the same page when it mattered.

“I’d really like to vote for that, too... But I can’t imagine Megumin and Darkness giving up on their love interest (namely, me) and just going home. What to do; what to do?”

“Good question... And I can’t believe they would go home without finding me, whom they worship.”

We continued to say things that would have made the other two very angry if they’d been there. And we kept waiting.

That was when it happened.

“...? I heard some sort of scuffling in the distance. Wait here a second,” I said. I could hear someone running outside the room. I activated my Eavesdrop skill again to get a sense of what was going on.

“Reinforcements! Call for reinforcements!”

“Everyone from the upper floors, head downstairs! The intruders are making a real mess of things! They broke through the barrier, and they’re forcing their way up!”

“Nooo! I heard that working as castle guard was supposed to be easy and safe! The elite of the elite! I, uh, just remembered I forgot to feed my pet Neroid! Can I go home?!”

It sounded like Mitsurugi, Yunyun, and the others were on the hunt for us and getting violent. So...did that mean it was better to wait here a while longer?

“Sounds like the others are fighting their way up here and making good time,” I said.

“Ah, I’d expect no less from my chosen legendary followers. Mm, heroes rescuing a goddess trapped in the Demon King’s castle. The saga practically writes itself, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, except it’s more *rescuing a goddess who ran away from home, got lost, and finally stumbled into a trap, so that she was stuck in the Demon King’s castle and didn’t know which way was up.*” Aqua, sitting and pulling her knees into her chest beside me, gave me a displeased shove in the shoulder. That reminded me, though. “When we see Megumin and Darkness again, make sure to apologize, okay? I can pretty much promise you you’re going to get a good long lecture from Darkness when we return home. And I know Megumin is usually right with you when you get that kind of scolding, but I don’t think she’s going to cover for you this time.”

“Hey, um, Kazuma... When we get back home, I’ll give you my very special, strangely shaped rock if you’ll speak up for me. The truth is, even I know I kind of screwed up this time.”

Just kind of? Even I wanted to give her a lecture for that, but starting her weeping here and now wouldn't solve anything. Anyway, I was sure the other two would give her more than enough grief to cover all three of us.

Besides, there were so many other things I'd meant to say when I saw her. I was going to tell her how I, the consummate slacker, had trained myself up in a dungeon just for her sake, and how I'd bankrupted myself to bring down that barrier, and how she'd worried everyone in Axel—and that was just for starters.

I could tell her how Wiz and Vanir, the typical goddess's archenemies, had helped me help her. I could gripe about what had happened on my most recent journey and how hopeless the Axis Church was. There were lots of other things I could say, too, but when I saw her dumb face just looking completely relieved...

"...? What's going on? Why are you giving me that weird look? Are you that profoundly moved to see your goddess in the flesh after being apart for so long? If you've finally started to revere me a little, then you can prove it by making whatever side dish I want at dinner every ni— Ow! Ow, that hurts! I'm sorry—I didn't mean to get carried away! Ooh, but then again, we haven't shared a moment like this in a long time, either!"

I grabbed Aqua by the cheek, and even though I was angry with her, she looked a little bit happy about it.

At that moment, though, my Eavesdrop skill let me in on another conversation...

"All right, listen up, everybody! As you well know, the Demon King's honored daughter has taken a huge army to settle the score with humanity. At this very moment, she's smashing through an entire squadron of human knights! If anyone found out that while she was grinding an entire army under her heel, those of us who are supposed to be protecting the castle couldn't even corral a handful of intruders, there are going to be some very uncomfortable questions! So starting now, we're going to go through every room on every floor with a fine-tooth comb! We're going to find those invaders and tear them apart!"

"Uh, Kazuma, are they really going to do that? I've been in some tight spots before, but I've got the bad feeling to end all bad feelings right now..."

"Yeah, well, if they come looking in this room, we're finished. I'm scared, too, but I'm not the one who went toddling off to the Demon King's castle. Besides, this might actually be our chance to take down His Majesty himself, right?"

At this rate, they were going to find us eventually. So I decided to

try an all-or-nothing plan.

“Yeah, you’re right, but I’m sort of finding I don’t really care about the Demon King right now. I was so relieved to see you, and now I want to hurry up and find the others and go home.”

Some goddess! What was that letter about, then?

Still, I *totally* understood how she felt.

“I’m not exactly eager to go running off to the Demon King myself. But everyone else is, all right? What do you think will happen if the two of us show up like, *Hey, we’re kinda scared of the Demon King, so we’re going home?*”

“I think they might just stone us to death. And I’m not sure we’d be able to object.”

“Right? So first things first, we have to get out of this room and link up with the others. After that, if we can just make it to the Demon King’s chamber, I’ve got an idea. I’ll show you my *real* killer move.” As I spoke, I carefully adjusted my helmet.

By which I mean the helmet I’d taken from the pile of armor left behind by the knight I’d teleported earlier.

I didn’t know what kind of monster had really been under this armor, but the suit didn’t smell like an animal, so maybe he’d been more human than one might have expected. The armor was a little big for me, but it wasn’t like it was so heavy that I couldn’t walk.

“Ooh, your killer move! What is it? A beam? Are you going to use a beam weapon this time? Or... Don’t tell me! Will you use my party tricks?!”

“The hell I will. Just pipe down and get ready. And hit me again with that great-performer magic. As for me... Heh-heh-heh! It looks like the time has finally come for me to use...*this*.” With my most villainous smile, I took out the poisoned potion I’d gotten from my good friend the assassin back in Axel.

“Kazuma... Um, Kazuma? I’m not sure a hero destined to defeat the Demon King should be using something like that. My goddess instincts are crying out for me to purify that potion...”

I practically had to force Aqua away. “H-hey, back off. I’ll be honest with you. Even I’m not sure about this. But the assassin who taught me this killer skill said I should take one of these, too. I’m willing to get my hands dirty if that’s what it takes to keep this world safe. For my friends, for everyone, I’m not going to leave anything off the table. I don’t want any regrets.”

I dipped the tip of Dust’s sword into the potion.

“You seem to think you can talk your way out of this, Kazuma, but I can tell you’re straying further and further from the hero’s path.

You have to be careful of the company you keep, you know?”

“Considering that I live with the incarnated deity of the Axis Church, I think it’s a little late for that. Hey, stop that—that potion was expensive! Don’t try to purify it!” I hurriedly slid the potion-coated sword back into its scabbard. “Okay. Ready to go? Let’s get moving.”

“I’m ready anytime. Say, Kazuma, don’t hit me too hard, okay? If you get a big head about this, I’m not going to just play along, all right? I don’t mean to brag, but I’m not very good at keeping a stiff upper lip.”

Yeah, thanks, I figured that much after a lot of firsthand experience.

Wearing the black armor, I opened the door to our room. Then I called in Nos’s voice:

“Hey! I found the intruders!!”

2

Aqua and I were surrounded by armored monsters. A particularly large one carrying a two-handed ax shook his goatlike head. “Damn shame about Logia, getting sliced up like that. The guy who ran away and left this woman here must’ve been quite a fighter. Look at Logia’s wound. It’s a clean cut, like they got him in one hit while he was completely defenseless.”

Well, it looked that way because that was what had happened. Goat Head’s take on the situation seemed to really upset a lizard-headed monster who had his weapon drawn on Aqua. “Dammit! I want to get them back for Logia! Let me chop our captive here into a million pieces!”

“Wh-what, you want to fight? I’ll have you know I’m very strong! I haven’t been collecting the Axis followers’ faith for nothing!” Aqua acted like she was ready to fight, trying to intimidate Lizard Head, but the monsters encircling us jumped back.

“Axis followers! Did you hear that? She’s an Axis believer! Oh, shit!”

“Oh, crap, I talked to an Axis believer!”

“Unclean! Unclean!”

“Aw, man, I don’t wanna have anything to do with any Axis believer!”

“Ugh... Look at that blue hair. She’s Axis, all right!”

They backed away even farther, muttering to one another.

“...!”

“Dammit, Nos, hold her back already!”

“That was a close one! I almost got touched by an Axis follower!”

Aqua looked like she might just jump at the mouthy monsters; they all took another step back at her threatening gestures. But I had the mad Axis dog (that is, Aqua) by the neck, my Bind rope wrapped around her throat like a leash. Aqua herself had felt that would be better than having her hands and feet tied up and not being able to move.

“Hey, Nos, do us a favor... Take her outside the castle and get rid of her. Man, too bad you don’t have brains to match your brawn. You know she’s an Axis follower, right? Aren’t you scared of her? Do you even know what an Axis follower is?” asked Goat Head. He was keeping his distance, just like the rest of them, but he seemed to be the spokesperson for the group.

That’s right: I was pretending to be Nos and pretending I had captured Aqua.

The way Goat Head was talking, it sounded like I’d been right about Nos being a meathead. Now, I remembered the sound of his voice, but how had he talked, again? I put a hand to my throat, thought hard about how he’d sounded, and said, “Aw, no, sir, can’t do that! This girl’s our trump card against the guy who got away. After all, this Kazuma guy is fearsome strong and can even use magic and stuff. He’s pretty much the full package. But if we use this chick as a hostage, we can’t lose! And we can use her to draw out the ones who are causing trouble right now!”

I thought I was doing a pretty good job imitating Nos’s voice, but for some reason, the other monsters took a step back again.

H-huh? Was my voice not convincing enough...?

“G-geez, Nos, did you hit your head in that fight? You were never exactly a bright one, but now even the way you’re talking sounds stupid. We told you to talk more like a knight, didn’t we? So you’d at least seem halfway intelligent...”

“Yeah! And taking a woman as a hostage? That’s a new low!”

“Nos is scarin’ me!”

I guess every monster’s a critic, but in the middle of it all, Goat Head scratched his chin like he was getting an idea. “Hmm... The only thing you ever had going for you was your muscles, Nos, and if even you think this guy is a serious opponent, then it really might be a good plan to have an extra card we can play. All right! Nos, bring the woman with us! But keep an eye on her, okay? Don’t let her near anyone else!”

After admonishing “Nos” a few more times about keeping Aqua away, Goat Head finally turned around.

“.....” Without a word, Aqua dashed up and started putting her hands all over his back.

“Oh no! The Axis follower touched Master Mammon!”

“Eek! Unclean, Master Mammon, unclean!”

“Nooooo! I told you to keep an eye on her! Hey, stop that, Axis follower—get off me! Shoo! Shoo!”

We hiked around the Demon King’s gloomy castle with the squad of monsters. Maybe not everyone with us was able to see in the dark, because a few of them carried torches. That meant that if they found out who I really was, I could douse their flames to give myself an advantage.

I was mulling over worst-case scenarios, Aqua and me bringing up the rear of the group. It was going great; so far, nobody else had suggested doing Aqua any harm to pay her back for their friend. I had two goals: safely reunite with Mitsurugi and the others and see if I could tease out where the Demon King was staying. But that was when...

“Kazuma? Kazuma!” Aqua whispered back at me from a few steps ahead. Since the other monsters considered Aqua “unclean,” they were keeping their distance from us, but I still wished she wouldn’t talk to me.

“Yeah, what? I thought I told you not to talk to me,” I whispered back.

Aqua, looking very serious, said, “I think I’ve taken about as much of this as I possibly can. Why do I have to be called unclean? No matter how you cut it, this is no way to treat a goddess. I expected to get in the sort of trouble that a goddess kidnapped by evil villains might get into, but I feel more like a mad dog or a rabid animal.”

“Just hang in there awhile longer. With this many of them around, I don’t think we could even run away... Oops, wherever we’re going, I think we’re there.”

Aqua and I found ourselves in a big room with weapons propped up all around.

Geez, this looked dangerous. I could practically feel the *powerful enemy* aura emanating from every one of the armored knights.

While Aqua and I cowered a little, not eager to enter the room, Goat Head announced, “Hey, everyone, we captured one of the intruders! From what I’m hearing, it sounds like we’ve got some extremely powerful enemies on our hands. Given that they just about managed to blow this castle to pieces, I’m not sure we’d be able to protect His Majesty if we had to face them head-on! But listen close. Nos came up with a great idea. We’re gonna use this girl as a hostage and finish the intruders in one fell swoop!”

““““Woo-hoo!”””””

The assembled knights sounded awfully relieved. I guess Megumin's particular brand of violence had traumatized the Demon King's army. Not that I really blamed them. They'd thought they were safe here in this castle, when suddenly someone was launching explosions at them and taking down the barrier that had protected them for so long. Not to mention defeating their superpowerful guard and storming straight into the castle.

“Oh, thank goodness... What a relief...!”

“Taking a woman hostage, though? I didn't think Nos was the type to do something like that...”

“I mean, taking hostages in general is sort of an underhanded trick, right? I would have said only positions up to the overseer of each region were allowed to do something like that. We're supposed to be the Demon King's personal guard. Are we sure about this?”

The Demon King's army began an earnest discussion as Goat Head walked into the room, approaching a magical device about the size of a cigarette case. “This is Mammon, commander of the royal guard on the topmost level of the Demon King's castle! We've apprehended one of the intruders! All units currently in contact with the enemy, inform them of that fact! The prisoner is an Axis priest. Tell them that if they don't want her killed, they must surrender!”

Then the goat-headed creature called Mammon sat down, smirking broadly.

3

The monsters were waiting on pins and needles, but the room remained silent. Aqua was acting unusually calm. In fact...I think she yawned just now. Maybe she was that relaxed, knowing she had me beside her, and we could teleport out of danger anytime we needed to?

Mammon, apparently unhappy that Aqua didn't seem more frightened, decided to start up an interrogation. “Hey, woman, how many invaders were with you? If you don't want to get hurt, tell us everything you know. Especially about this amazing Kazuma guy who ran away and left you behind. What class is he? What kind of gear does he carry? And fill us in on his fighting style, combat history, and his personality. Like I said, everything you know.”

He sounded like he was just killing time until they got their hands on Mitsurugi and the others. *Hrm*. I hoped Aqua wouldn't say anything outrageous and get us both in a lot of trouble.

“Sure, I'll tell you,” she replied. “But could you make some tea for me? My throat's a bit dry.”

“You little—!” one of the knights burst out, incensed by Aqua’s demand.

Mammon, though, held up a hand. “Bah, make the woman some tea. It’s the last thing she’ll ever drink anyway. Make it from our nicest stuff.” So Mammon could command a knight to make tea? That was boss-level authority. “Okay, let’s start with how many of you there are and this Kazuma guy’s class. What is he? A Crusader? A Sword Master? Judging by the hit he gave Logia, I can guess he’s no wizard.”

“How many of us? Well, including me, I guess eight people. And Kazuma’s class is Adventurer.”

Aqua proved very forthcoming, but silence descended on the room. Until...

““““Pbbbt!””””

Everyone except Aqua and me burst out laughing.

“Adventurer?! The weakest class?! That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard! How would he even make it to this castle? Pfa-ha-ha-ha! Ahhh, I get it. He’s your porter. And he put all his skill points into swordsmanship. How about it? Am I right?” Mammon chortled.

Aqua shook her head. “No, you’re not. Yes, Kazuma can use a sword, but he knows a fair bit of magic, too. He can also use healing magic, even if it was a dirty, unfair thing for him to learn. And he can use Teleport, and an undead skill called Drain Touch, and a lot more, too. Oh, thank you.” Aqua politely took the tea the knight had brought her.

Everyone went quiet again, so that the only sound was Aqua sipping her drink.

“Excuse me but, um, this is just hot water.”

She held out her cup, and it was indeed just water inside.

“You, don’t pull dumb pranks on the captive. You want me with egg all over my face? I’m as angry as you are that Logia and Payne bought it, but this is no time for childish games!” Mammon shouted. The knight took Aqua’s cup in a veritable panic and went to get more tea, although he looked pretty confused about it.

I knew what was going on here. She’d changed the tea into hot water herself. I wished she wouldn’t do that. The thing about no dumb pranks went both ways.

Mammon cleared his throat, straightened his back, and said, “I’m sorry, my minions are acting rather juvenile. Drain Touch, though...

are you sure? That's supposed to be a very rare skill possessed only by the undead... Well, whatever, go ahead. What kind of equipment does this Kazuma carry? I know these black-haired, black-eyed guys sometimes have legendary gear. It would explain how he was able to get Logia and Payne. If that's what we're dealing with, a judicious use of Steal might be in order..."

I guess Mammon was having a brainstorm.

"Kazuma pretty much buys run-of-the-mill stuff from wherever," Aqua said. "For the longest time, he just carried this cheap short sword, but it was enough to let him take on a whole bunch of your generals. These days, he's got this imitation Japanese katana with this weird name, and he practices swinging it until late every night, shouting, 'Hiyah! Hiyah!' ... Oh, thank you." Aqua accepted another cup of tea as the room went quiet yet again.

Shit, had she really seen me doing my secret practice? Ugh, I wished she wouldn't give away a guy's embarrassing secrets like that.

One of the knights said, "I've heard stories. I mean, about this Kazuma guy. They say his name is Kazuma Satou and that he's taken down one general after another using the most inhuman tactics..."

The knight's voice was the only sound in the room until Aqua said:

"Um, this is still just hot water."

Mammon sent the knight who'd made the tea flying with a vicious blow at the same time as he asked nervously, "Th-this friend of yours, is he the same Kazuma as the Kazuma Satou who took down all those generals?"

"The very same. Pretty much any general who never came back to your castle, you can bet Kazuma had something to do with it. Beldia, Vanir, Hans, Sylvia, Wolbach, Serena. I guess that's about all of them who Kazuma did in, as far as I know." Aqua was really getting into it, talking eagerly about my battles. "He's done other stuff, too. Like, he took out the monster pretending to be the prime minister of the next country over, and he's been in charge of slaying a lot of large bounty heads. I guess Mobile Fortress Destroyer would be the first one, but there were others after that."

The great hall could hardly have gotten any silent-er; everyone was hanging on Mammon and Aqua's conversation.

I did hear someone gulp audibly, though. Aqua did, too, and it got her going again. She seemed to be having fun intimidating the knights. "Let's see...what else? You said you wanted to know about his fighting style and personality, right? I'd say the word that best describes Kazuma is *dirty*. Dirty and mean and awfully quick-witted.

The one thing you can count on when you're fighting him is that he won't come at you from straight on. Instead, he might watch you from afar, then take you out in one shot with his Deadeye skill. Or he might use Ambush to hide and then get you from behind when you're least expecting it."

Who was she calling "dirty" and "mean"? I would have to smack her silly for that later.

"Deadeye? Ambush?" Mammon was sounding pretty uneasy.

Aqua, taking another cup of tea, said, "That's right, Ambush. And he has a skill called Sense Foe, so he can stay hidden and still know exactly what you're all doing. In fact... Who knows? Kazuma might be in this very room right now!"

""""Eeeeeek!"""" the knights squealed. Meanwhile, I got a good grip on my scabbard so I could take a swipe at Mammon at any time. Heck, I wished Aqua wouldn't freak them out like that. Why would she go out of her way to put them on their guard?!

Mammon looked around, openly worried. Aqua sipped her tea.

"Hot water again," she said.

"Now, hold on a second! Something's funny here! I swear I've been making that tea right all— No, Master Mammon, it's not like that! I swear I've been making the tea right!"

Mammon got up to dispense justice on the knight Aqua was tweaking. But just then—

"Master Mammon, we've captured more intruders! One of them was an extremely powerful fighter with an enchanted sword, but when he heard we had a hostage with blue hair, he turned real cooperative!"

Such was the report from the knight who came rushing into the room. There was a collective sigh of relief, not least from Mammon, who had been just about to punch out the armored tea knight. Instead, he turned to the newcomer and said, "Excellent, bring him here! Good work—this is exactly what we wanted! And you, Nos! Your plan worked to perfection. You can expect a handsome reward later!" A big grin crossed his goatlike face.

A group of very familiar faces entered the room, escorted by a troop of armored knights. Mitsurugi was at the head of the party, which

included everyone who had broken into the castle.

“Lady Aqua! I’m so glad to see you’re safe!” Mitsurugi said when he saw Aqua sipping tea at the far end of the great hall. Darkness, Megumin, and Yunyun likewise relaxed when they saw that Aqua was in one piece. As for Mitsurugi’s two girlfriends, they scowled, held their weapons at the ready and didn’t move.

When Mammon realized Mitsurugi and the others still had their arms, he said, “Heh, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to drop your weapons. I don’t like relying on these kinds of underhanded schemes, you know, but this lady’s been telling us some pretty scary stories. You! You there! You’re the one they call Kazuma, aren’t you?! Throw down your weapon and come over here!”

He pointed directly at Mitsurugi.

“Um, that’s not him,” Aqua said, sipping her tea without a trace of concern. “That’s Magic Sword Guy. None of those people is Kazuma.”

“?!” Her pronouncement sent a shock through the room full of knights.

Mammon, who had just been starting to relax, suddenly began looking restlessly around again. Goat Head there seemed like a boss character in his own right, and apparently he was terrified of me. And this after I’d told Aqua not to play things up too much. If he was too worried, it would hurt my chances of doing what I had to do.

This was all because Aqua had to let herself get carried away frightening these guys...

“Pfah. She’s right—the numbers don’t add up,” Mammon said. “Okay. The woman will be more than enough of a hostage to give us leverage over Kazuma. As for the others, just finish them off! And please don’t put up a fight, eh, kids? ‘Cause you know what’ll happen to *her*...!”

Mammon sounded like a third-rate villain, but evidently Mitsurugi was reading from the same script, because he simply grunted, “Hrgh...!” and looked angry. Megumin and Darkness looked like they might be trying to think of a plan.

Before they could do anything, though, Mammon snapped, “Okay, throw down your weapons! You lot, surround them!”

Well. It looked like things were only going to go downhill from here.

I sidled up to Mammon. “Hold on, Mammon, sir! How can you expect Logia and Payne to rest in peace if you give these people such an easy death? Please, sir, let me handle them!”

“Er, *ahem*, yes. You always were close with those two. I suppose I can let you deal with them... But ye gods, can’t you do something

about the way you're talking?"

Having safely obtained Mammon's permission, I tugged on the rope around Aqua's neck. It was supposed to be a signal: *This is our chance. Make a run for Mitsurugi and the others.*

"I'm, whaddayacallit, reinventing myself, sir. Now, the lot of you, are you seeing this? Here in my hand I have a rope connected, as you can see, to your friend, who's shaking with terror!"

"Looks to me like she's drinking tea," Megumin quipped. I'd given Aqua the signal, but she only held the rope limply in one hand; otherwise, she was just sitting there sipping her drink. Dammit, not only could she not read a room, her intuition wasn't worth squat, either. I wanted to give her a good smack.

Bah. Okay, change of plans.

"You there! The Crusader girl!"

"?!" Darkness, who was still holding her great sword, was so surprised to have me suddenly talking to her that she almost jumped out of her skin. I felt bad for her, but before anything else, I had to throw this Mammon guy off the scent.

"I want you to drop that weapon," I said. "And if you make a peep about it, you know what'll happen to your tea-drinking friend here."

"All right... My attacks don't land anyway. There, is that better?" Darkness said, throwing down her sword. She was right: Abandoning her weapon wouldn't actually affect her usefulness in combat very much. And everyone else, including Mammon, started to relax when they saw one of the captives disarm herself.

I didn't order the others to throw down their weapons, though, but continued talking to Darkness. "Next... Let's see. I think I like that evil-looking armor of yours. How about you take it off for me?"

"What?! M-my armor? No, no! The armor is... If nothing else, leave me the armor!"

I'd expected her to just do what I said, but I was encountering some surprising resistance from Darkness.

"You saying you can't take it off? Do you understand the position you're in? What happens to a female knight who gets captured in the Demon King's own castle? Every knight knows about it; it's practically proverbial! Now, I'm ordering you to take off that armor, right in front of all of us!"

"What? You can't be serious...!" Darkness flushed red and gritted her teeth.

""""Wow!"""" For some reason, even the other knights sounded amazed.

"Scary! Scary Nos!"

"Geez, you're a real scumbag! I can't believe this is the same guy who used to rescue kittens..."

“L-listen, Nos. I know I said I’d let you deal with them, but even I think this is going a little far...”

I thought the other knights were supposed to be, like, my professional colleagues or something. And now even Mammon looked like he was having second thoughts.



That didn't stop me, though. "Heh-heh! I'll bet you have one sexy bod underneath that armor," I went on. "Why not go ahead and strip? You'll be saving your friends' lives. Great excuse, right?"

"E-excuse me? N-no, I can't let this nobody discipline me like a—! Ahhh... Why? Why is it so hard to resist your...p-penetrative gaze? Who are you? It's like you know my weaknesses..." Blushing furiously and obviously conflicted, Darkness began to undo the clasps of her armor. When the first plate fell to the floor, we could see the pale skin of her shoulder.

""""""Whoa!""""""

Oops. I'd exclaimed just like the rest of the Demon King's army.

"I w-won't be broken by a little humiliation!"

Two things bothered me: One, Darkness, still bright red but looking straight at me with what I was sure was eagerness in her eyes. And two, Megumin looking at me like she couldn't believe she was hearing this.

Okay, I knew Megumin was sharp, but she couldn't have figured me out...right?

Just then—

"Stop! I won't let this continue! You may be a member of the Demon King's army, but you're still a knight, aren't you?! How can you live with yourself, treating a woman like this?! Face us in combat, as is proper!"

It was Mitsurugi, totally unable to read a room.

Mammon looked shocked back to his senses by Mitsurugi's shouting; he straightened up, and his gaze got firmer. *Shit!* Mitsurugi was out of line in more ways than one.

The rest of the soldiers, though, let out a sigh of disappointment that he'd stopped me.

Wait... Was it just me, or did Darkness sigh, too?

Mammon took a step forward.

He was big, he had an ax...and his back was to me, completely defenseless. His goatlike, yellow-tinged eyes glinted. "Give it up, Nos; you've had your fun! We've got a hostage, and that's all we need. Okay, everyone, surround them! I'll take on the boy. Without that Kazuma person around, this should be easy!" he spat, then got a good

grip on his ax.

“Kazuma? You mean Kazuma *Satou*? Hey, I’m stronger than he is! My name is Kyouya Mitsurugi, a Sword Master with an enchanted blade whose name is, I daresay, known far and wide!”

Things in the room were getting tense again, but he sounded like he was talking about the weather.

“Oh-ho. Are you indeed so afraid of our Kazuma?”

Megumin, holding up her staff threateningly, started interrogating Mammon.

“What, him? You mean the underhanded scoundrel who’s off hiding somewhere right now? I’m not afraid of him!”

Darkness, picking up the pieces of her armor and strapping them back on, said:

“I wouldn’t take that man lightly. Every foe I’ve encountered since I ran into him has met a bad end. And believe me...you’ll be no exception.”

Was she being nice or throwing me under the bus? I wasn’t sure, but she looked right at me as she said it. If I’d had a chance to say my piece, I would have pointed out that the same was true of pretty much *everyone* she’d run into, not only her enemies.

“Just shut up, will you?! My name is Mammon! The great Mammon, captain of the royal guard entrusted with this great hall that leads to the Demon King’s chamber! I could face down even the generals in a straight fight! And you think I’m going to run scared from a man who isn’t even here? Ha!”

As if that was their cue, Mammon’s knights drew their swords. Mitsurugi likewise slowly drew his enchanted blade. Yunyun’s eyes were shining red, and she held her wand behind her back, ready to intone her magic at any time.

I guess they were all raring to go.

As for me, I reached for my sword, looking for any moment when Mammon might be open...

“Do you mean it? You were acting so terrified earlier, so are you really not afraid of Kazuma? He could be *right behind you*, you know.”

Leave it to Aqua to spoil the mood. She looked awfully at ease for someone who was supposedly a hostage, not even flinching at Mammon’s terrifying visage. She obviously assumed that no matter

what kind of pinch we got into, I would figure something out. If we made it back to town alive, I was going to have to have a long talk with her.

“Did I stutter? I’m not scared! Hey, Kazuma Satou, are you listening?! Yeah, you, you scheming, cowering wretch! I know you’re up here somewhere! If you can hear me, come out and tell meeee!”

I cast aside my helmet, buried my sword in the back of Mammon’s neck, and said, “Nice to meet you! I’m Underhanded Kazuma!”

5

I immediately pulled my sword back out and got myself some distance from Mammon. I’d used a skill, a killer technique the assassin had taught me called Deadly Backstab. If you used it when the target wasn’t paying attention to you, you had a chance of inflicting a fatal hit. It was useful only in very specific circumstances, but it was the perfect ability for me.

I didn’t know if it was the skill at work or the poison I’d slathered on my blade, but Mammon pitched forward, his mouth working helplessly open and shut. The other monsters, seeing the knight they’d assumed was their friend suddenly turn into me, started panicking.

“It—it’s hiiiiim!”

“He killed Master Mammon! And so suddenly!”

“What vile tactics! What foul deeds!”

“What?! Hold on...*what*?! Is that even a thing? You pull stunts like that, and you still call yourself human?!”

The monsters might have been completely freaked out, but I guess they really were members of the Demon King’s personal guard, because they quickly resumed their formation, and about three of them started advancing on us.

“*Light of Saber!*” Over by the entryway, a pretty good distance from where we stood at the far end of the room, Yunyun used her trademark spell to cut down one of the knights.

Darkness seized the moment: Completely ignoring the attacks that came her way, she charged straight at us. Mitsurugi and the rest tumbled after her, and in the blink of an eye, the great hall became a battlefield.

“This guy’s dangerous!” shouted the knight who was blocking my way, his weapon at the ready. “Surround him, and we’ll get him in one shot!” The two others with him nodded. Three sword points were leveled directly at me.

“Grrr, three against one? Some knights... And you still call yourselves the Demon King’s personal guards?!”

“Huh? H-hey, you’re one to talk! Making your own party member

strip off her armor and then ambushing Master Mammon like that? You shut your mouth!”

“Y-yeah, how dare you speak to us like that...!”

“Just forget it, you two. I’m done letting this guy make us dance to his t—!”

All the complaining, though, left the knights open for just one second.

“*Bind!*”

“?! Wha—?! Hey!”

I didn’t feel compelled to let the guy finish. My superpowerful binding rope wrapped itself around him like a living creature!

“Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow-ow! Hey, Kazuma, that hurts!”

...But the rope wrapped around Aqua’s neck squeezed down with it.

“Ugh! Good gods! Not only did he ambush Master Mammon, he thinks nothing of sacrificing his companions! I never expected him to be so inhuman! Shit, I let my guard down! You two, take care of this!”

It kind of hurt to be called inhuman, but I could hardly admit that I’d just plain forgotten that Aqua was at the other end of the rope.

“Kazuma! Kazumaaaa! This guy’s armor is really hard, and it hurts! Can I use my magic to undo the Bind?”

“Hang in there just a little longer! I’m going to take care of these other two!” I said, and then I turned toward the remaining knights, who had their swords up and were watching me closely. They lowered their weight, ready to fight.

“That inhuman bastard might do a lot of talking, but you saw him. He took one of us out of the fight before we knew what was happening. Don’t blink. We go on three!”

“I’ve got it! On three.”

As they stood there working out their timing, I focused on the first knight’s voice and...

“Nah, y’know, I think we should do it on ‘Ready and Go!’ Or maybe on a count of ten...”

“Huh? Well, which is it?!”

“Hey, stop that! Don’t imitate my voice!”

While my antics threw my opponents into confusion, there was a shout from someone else: “Watch out! The Crusader’s headed your way!”

The knights in front of me glanced toward the voice...

“Eeeyikes?! ”

“Wh-what the hell’s going on?!”

It didn’t matter if they sliced at her. It didn’t matter if they punched her.

“Stop, stop! Don’t let her go that way—stop her!”

“She *won’t* stop! I’m cutting her and cutting her, but she looks perfectly happy...!”

Two more knights were clinging to Darkness’s waist, trying desperately to drag her away from the Demon King’s chamber, but she was hell-bent on getting to Aqua and me. When she reached me, she said, “Kazuma, Aqua, I’m here to rescue you!” even as she tried to peel the knights off her. “I’ve come...to... G-grrr... Kazuma, could I get a little help here? These two just won’t...!”

“What do you think you’re doing, dragging two more enemies right over to us?! Now it’s two against four!” I exclaimed. The two knights who’d been clinging to Darkness let go and joined their comrades in surrounding us.

At that moment, we heard a triumphant chuckle.

“Try *three* against four.” Standing there looking absolutely thrilled with herself was Aqua, who’d broken my Bind. Which, of course, meant the knight who’d been tied up with her was free, too... “H-hey, Kazuma, is it just me, or does it suddenly look like the numbers are against us?”

“Why do I have to face down five opponents with nothing but an incapable Crusader and a pitiful Priest on my side?! You must both be total idiots!”

While we were arguing, the five knights had all pointed their swords directly at me and were preparing to launch an attack. I guess they had really taken those threats to heart. They were clearly looking to get rid of me first.

This was bad... With five of the Demon King’s elite troops coming at me at once, I was as good as dead! I was trying to decide if there might be some way to hide behind Darkness when the knights lunged.

“*Decoy!*” The knights’ swords abruptly turned toward Darkness, the blades scraping against her armor, leaving some light scratches on her cheek and sending a few strands of golden hair flying through space.

The knights, who’d been expecting to attack me, were thrown into confusion by suddenly having hit Darkness instead.

“H-how could I, as great and powerful as I am, have been fooled by a Decoy skill?!”

“Shit! I don’t know why, but this Crusader makes me want to hurt her...! It’s like I feel *compelled* to stab her...!”

The knights were totally flummoxed by their own behavior, but they all stabbed Darkness at once, the perv’s face lighting up bright red and her breath coming hard. “Hrn! I would have expected no less from the Demon King’s elite troops. You stab hard and true...! But I’ll

accept all your attacks! Come on, now! Do your worst! Unleash all your most awful attacks! Quickly, now! Hurry up and stab me!”

The enemies backed away instead, thinking this must be some kind of trap.

Suddenly, one of the five crumpled.

“Lady Aqua! Are you all right?!”

We looked toward the sound of Mitsurugi’s voice to discover that every knight in the room had been taken out except for the five surrounding us. One of those five turned toward the intruder, looking to deal a blow with his sword, but...

“?! Hey! M-my fell blade?!”

“This enchanted sword is a legendary weapon, a gift to me from the goddess herself. There’s nothing it can’t cut,” Mitsurugi said as he sliced neatly through the knight’s sword and then through the knight.

“This guy’s even worse than the inhuman freak over there! We’d better take him out first, or— Ahhhh!” Mitsurugi sliced the knight up before he could finish talking. That prompted two more to come at him at once, but—

“*Rune of Saber!*” Mitsurugi swept them both aside, his sword glowing with magic.

“Curse this man... Acting like I need him to—!” Darkness, who had basically been saved like a damsel in distress, was muttering angrily.

Geez, that enchanted sword of his really was a cheat. Did every Japanese person around here except me have an item that OP?

Mitsurugi shook the blood from his blade, then went over to Aqua and took her hand. “Lady Aqua, are you hurt?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Let me handle Darkness’s wounds...” Mitsurugi still hadn’t let go of her hand, and she gave him a funny look.

“Oh, uh, sorry, milady!”

“I don’t really mind, but if you start casually committing sexual harassment like that, you’ll wind up like Kazuma.”

“I’m gonna slap you so hard...” I grumbled.

Mitsurugi dropped Aqua’s hand like a hot potato.

“I’ve gotta give it to you, though,” I said. “You really are strong. How about you just go take care of the Demon King for us? All by yourself.” I looked around the room.

The only thing I saw were the corpses of Mammon and his knights lying on the ground. And Mitsurugi had defeated most of them...

“I don’t know. I think you got a much bigger cheat than I did,” Mitsurugi said as he put his sword away, with a significant glance at Aqua.

A big cheat? I let my gaze wander toward Aqua. Maybe she sensed

we were talking about her, because she refused to meet my eyes; instead, she acted like she was focused on fixing up Darkness.

Megumin and Yunyun came over, looking relieved, but me, I was curious about the huge door at the far end of the room. I was sure Mammon had said that this hall led to the Demon King's chamber. That might explain why there were knights hanging out in here—a last line of defense against any attackers.

Aqua and I had sort of cheated our way here, but I knew what had to be waiting on the other side of that door. We'd made enough of a ruckus that he had to know we were here. Once everyone was gathered around, I said, "Okay. We've achieved our stated objective—namely, to retrieve Aqua. Now Yunyun and I just teleport us all home..."

Mitsurugi shook his head like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "How can you say such a thing when we're standing right here? This is the Demon King we're talking about. The enemy of all humanity is practically before our eyes! The vast majority of his forces are at the capital. We won't get another chance like this. It falls to us to finish things between humanity and the arch-fiend."

Yeah, that sounded great and all, but what about the Demon King's daughter who was supposed to be leading that army? If we took out her dad, wouldn't she just take over in his place?

"Yipes! Ow-ow-ow-ow, dath hurths! Hey, why are you both pinching my cheeks? Aren't hugs and *are you okay we were so worried*s more traditional at an emotional reunion like this?! It hurts! It hurts! The pain!"

I looked in the direction of Aqua's shouting to find her caught between Darkness and Megumin, each of whom was pulling on one cheek. It was kind of heartwarming, actually, to see her having so much fun.

"Hear me out," I said. "Megumin took down the castle barrier, so we can just waltz back in here anytime we feel like it. Let's get some real knights, let's get all the cheaters together, maybe the Crimson Magic Clan, and let them handle it."

I was acting nonchalant, but Yunyun sounded genuinely shocked. "She destroyed the barrier? Really? The entire Crimson Magic Clan together couldn't bring down that force field, and Megumin did it all by herself?"

"That's right. You said you all heard a bunch of explosions hitting the castle after you came in, right? That was some manatite-powered mayhem courtesy of—"

"K-Kazuma, that's quite enough!" Megumin said, trying to interrupt me.

Oops...!



“S-so that wasn’t the Demon King attacking the castle from outside at all; it was Megumin? Megumin, you would do that, knowing we were inside?!” Yunyun was shaking, and tears welled up in her eyes. *Shoot!* I’d forgotten we hadn’t told them about that yet. “You’re awful! Trying to bury us alive along with the Demon King... are you really my friend?!”

“I-it’s not like that! I mean, Kazuma had given me such a nice present, and the way things went, I just— Well, I got a little excited...”

“Uh, Darkness, I don’t mind you mussing my hair... I really don’t, but... With that gauntlet on, it hurts! I’m really sorry for running off on my own, so please just forgive me already!”

Mitsurugi’s spear-wielding girlfriend, ignoring the four of them—who weren’t acting like they were standing right in front of the Demon King’s own chamber—sighed and sat down. “So, like, what are we doing? Are we going on ahead? I mean, I would follow Kyouya *anywhere...*”

The Thief girl stood close to Mitsurugi and said, “Yeah, I came here for Kyouya’s sake. When we die, Kyouya, we’ll die together. Wherever you go, I’ll follow...”

That sounded cool, like a real party actually facing their final battle. Lucky bastard... From his overpowered enchanted sword to his cool-guy demeanor, Mitsurugi was making me jealous. *My* entourage consisted entirely of girls who did nothing but jabber, without a shred of sexiness or allure among them.

Megumin had gotten into a scuffle with Yunyun, while Aqua was being worked over by Darkness. How had Mitsurugi and I ended up in such different places in life?

“Lady Aqua, what do you think we should do?” Mitsurugi asked Aqua, who was in the process of having her neck wrung by Darkness.

“Me? That’s a good question... If it wouldn’t be too tough to defeat the Demon King, I think we should go ahead and kick his butt. But I have to admit, now that we’re all back together again, my motivation... It’s not quite as high as it was...” Her voice trailed off until she was barely whispering.

Ahhh. Losing her nerve when confronted with the real Demon King. I understood how she felt, though. I was eager to get back home, too.

“Let’s make tracks, then. We can always come back with real gear and a real plan. Just an idea, but with the barrier already down, maybe I should just register the spot outside the castle as a Teleport destination and then bring Megumin here every day to let off her explosion.”

“Hold it, Kazuma Satou. With the barrier gone, the Demon King has no reason to stay here anymore. There’s a good chance he’ll hole up in some dungeon where he’ll have a fighting chance against the army or any adventurers, until a general emerges with the strength to reestablish the barrier. From that perspective, I don’t think we can let this opportunity slip away.” Mitsurugi patted his girls on the head and disentangled himself from their grip.

I remembered patting Darkness on the head and smiling once long ago, only to be greeted with a sneer and a demand that I not mess up anyone’s hair in the future. Seriously, how did we end up so different?

The memory made me glance in Darkness’s direction.

“Listen up, Kazuma—when I’m done giving Aqua what she deserves, you’re next! That armor doesn’t even look good on you; take it off already!”

“Huh? Big talk when even you were hoping— Eeeyow-ow-ow-ow! Stop that! I’m sorry! Don’t use joint locks on me when I’m wearing armor! My entire body sounds like it’s going to break!”

My joints might have been in extreme duress, but Mitsurugi looked at me with complete seriousness. “You’re the very person who dragged Lady Aqua to this world in the first place, are you not? And yet, have even you given up on defeating the Demon King? Wouldn’t one normally expect you to seek to defeat the king even at the cost of your life, in order to return Lady Aqua to Heaven? Surely you owe her that much.”

This guy was as bad at reading a room as Aqua was, but for once I didn’t have any snappy comebacks. He was right, after all. Because I’d brought Aqua to this world, we weren’t getting any more reinforcements from Japan.

Mitsurugi dropped his gaze and whispered so only I could hear: “Besides, I can’t let you monopolize my beloved forever...”

He probably thought that was some jaw-dropping personal revelation or something.

Whispering so that only *he* could hear, I said, “Man, you have *bad* taste.”

The normally coolheaded Mitsurugi was suddenly at my throat, but I fought back by activating Drain Touch.

“Dammit! Must you be this way to the bitter end? I thought that if we battled the Demon King together, it was possible that friendship might blossom, even between us! And yet— H-hey, what skill is that? My strength... It’s...”

“If you want a boyfriend, I’ve got good news. There’s plenty of great catches in Axel! But if I hung out with you, people would think you only kept me around to make yourself look better. So scram!”

I’d managed to drain enough MP from Mitsurugi to be able to use

Teleport when Aqua broke in between us, looking uncharacteristically worried. “Listen, personally, I’ve had a lot of fun since I got here, every single day. It doesn’t bother me at all that I got dragged here, okay?” She seemed a little panicky, like she was trying not to look too freaked out.

“Why’d you run away, then?”

Mitsurugi’s question brought Aqua up short.

A look of sadness crossed her face; then she glanced apologetically at me. “I just wondered what it would feel like to run away from home...” Of all the things I’d thought she would say, that hadn’t been one of them. “It’s like... How do I put this? You know. I wanted to pull the rug out from under some people I thought had forgotten to be thankful for me. That’s why I went on that trip. How about it? Did it work? Did the townspeople say anything? Were they worried about me?”

Aqua pelted Megumin and Darkness with questions, more on edge than usual.

“Well, of course they were worried. How could they not be? After living in Axel for an entire year, you still get lost walking around town, Aqua. No one believed you could survive a real journey on your own,” Megumin said.

“You know why everyone was willing to teach Kazuma all those skills before we left? It was so we could bring you back safely,” Darkness added. “If it hadn’t been for the Demon King’s army planning to attack Axel, I can almost guarantee you we’d have come with a mountain of adventurers at our backs.”

“Huh! I guess that’s what they call being a *tsundere*. And to think, normally those people hardly have the time of day for me. Gosh! Well... I guess my hands are tied, then! Come on, Kazuma—let’s go home!” Aqua said brightly, turning a radiant smile on me.

That smile looked just as cheerful and dumb as it usually did. Except...there was something only someone who’d known Aqua for as long as I had could have noticed. The smallest traces of a shadow...

“Very well. If that’s your judgment, Lady Aqua, then I think in this case...”

That was Mitsurugi, who had no sense at all of the darkness behind Aqua’s expression. His two girlfriends breathed sighs of relief. Yunyun raised her wand and was about to intone the Teleport spell.

But I said:

“Haven’t you guys ever heard the expression ‘while you’re at it?’”

Megumin and Darkness turned back, grinning, as if they’d known all along I would say something like that.

Hey, stop it with those smiles. You look like you’re staring at a tsundere or something.

I’m not doing this for Aqua, I swear! I had my own reasons for defeating the Demon King.

“Listen, I spent pretty much every eris I have on manatite. I’m broke.”

We’d all known one another a long time now. I didn’t have to say much to explain a lot. No, I figured one more sentence would do it.

“How much do you think the bounty is on the Demon King?”

Chapter 3

Applause for This Paladin!

1

Darkness stood proudly before the door leading to the Demon King's chamber. Mitsurugi was behind her, followed by his spear wielder, his Thief girl, and then Yunyun, Aqua, and Megumin.

First, Darkness would bust down the door and immediately use her Decoy skill to draw the attacks of the Demon King and any guards in the room. That would give Mitsurugi and Yunyun, our chief firepower, time to take out the opposition. The spear wielder would look for any targets of opportunity, hitting the nearest enemies, while the Thief played a support role for everyone else. Aqua would use healing magic from the rear guard on anyone who got hurt while Megumin would bide her time at the tail of the formation. (She'd already done about as much magic as she could do in a day; I'd convinced her to bring up the rear by telling her she was our trump card.)

If it looked like the Demon King was too strong for even Darkness to deal with, Yunyun and I would get everyone out of there with Teleport while Darkness held the line and let Mitsurugi and Yunyun handle the king on their own.

And if it looked like the battle was going to run long...

"You really are underhanded, aren't you? From your fight with me to that ambush you sprang a few minutes ago...do you have something against fighting with honor? I gather you're spreading the word that you beat me, but it sort of eats at me to have been subjected to such a pathetic fighting style."

Mitsurugi could criticize all he wanted. I stuck to the shadows of the door. "Underhanded? I prefer the term *prudent*. And listen, there

are some fights you just can't afford to lose, even if you get labeled a dirty, rotten scoundrel because of how you win them. Say, for example, the final battle for the fate of humanity that we're about to jump into!"

I'd taken off the armor; it was hard to move in anyway. I had my enchanted sword out and ready and my bow and my beloved blade—complete with silly name—across my back.

If the battle looked like it was going to run long, I would let everyone else go in first, activate my Ambush skill to keep myself hidden, and then infiltrate the room a few minutes later. Then all I would have to do was find a moment when the Demon King was open and give him one good Deadly Backstab.

"Um, he only mentioned a couple of battles, but I think you've played dirty in pretty much all your fights, right?" Aqua said.

"Shhh! Do not say such things, Aqua. He is trying to look his best before we venture into battle with the Demon King."

"Yeah, what if you ticked him off? I wouldn't put it past him to teleport out of here all by himself and ditch us."

They were whispering behind me, but the fact was, I *had* been thinking about ditching them...

"All right, everyone, lend me your ears," Mitsurugi said, standing in front of the door. "It's incredible that we've come this far together. And now, as we stand on the cusp of the battle for the fate of humanity..."

As Mitsurugi started giving some sort of speech, Aqua tugged on my sleeve. "Kazuma, hey, Kazuma, are we really doing this? We've managed to get pretty strong, kind of in spite of ourselves, so couldn't we find some other way to make money? I have to say that a get-rich-quick scheme like defeating the Demon King doesn't really match up with your prudent, cowardly MO, Kazuma."

I wanted to ask if she was making fun of me, but I could see on her face that she was completely serious—and pretty worried.

"Who was it who brought up the entire idea of taking down the Demon King? When we get back to the mansion, you and I are going to have a very long talk." Yeah, earlier, when it had been just the two of us, my resolve had wavered, but now I was sure: When we got back, I was going to lecture her until she cried. "Anyway, you can say what you want, but you really want to go back to Heaven, right? Okay, then let's blitz the Demon King so you can go back anytime you want, and then we can live it up and have some fun. We're going to

do it carefully, though. If we pretend to be all strong and powerful at a moment like this, that's a death flag for sure. And I know you have a history of saying stuff that sets off death flags, so watch it, okay?"

I was remembering what Aqua had said the night she left.

"Look, Kazuma, it doesn't matter to me anymore. I really don't care, so let's just go home, okay? I went to see Emperor Zel again, and I'll listen to whatever lecture you all want to give me, as long as I have some delicious wine to drink while you do it. So... So let's go home, okay?"

I had half a mind to tell her not to *plan* on ignoring my all-important lecture.

"I wish I could go home..."

That's what Aqua had said as she held her knees and looked up at the moon, and it just wouldn't leave me alone.

"Shut up! I don't care if *you* want to go home; I need to get this whole thing off my back! I need to be able to return you to Heaven like a defective toy if I want to!"

"Like a defective *what*, you *tsundere* NEET?! You could at least stand to admit your true feelings at a time like this!" Aqua made to strangle me, but I darted back out of the way. Meanwhile, Mitsurugi and his entourage were really getting into it.

"Fio. Cremea. I want you to both relax. Even if we lose this battle, we'll go get stronger, and then we can come back here someday. I know how long you've worried. I know how hard you've worked to keep up with me, raising your levels whenever you could... Thank you so much for sticking with me to the very end. Let's beat the Demon King and go home. Together!"

Oops, sounded like that was the end of his speech. I guess whatever he'd said was really moving or something, because the spear wielder and the Thief were nodding, teary-eyed. I wondered distantly which one was Fio and which one was Cremea.

But anyway, more important things.

"Aqua, you understand the plan, right? If anyone dies, the fighting stops. We collect the body and teleport out of there. I need you to resist your instincts on this one. Don't go running over to resurrect them the moment they drop, understand? If somebody gets an attack in on you while you're doing the resurrection, it's all over. *First* teleport, *then* resurrection, got it? Because if you die on us, we've got nothing."

As long as we had Aqua with us, then even if the worst should happen... Well, it wasn't the worst that could happen. The question was whether Aqua, who tended to make a beeline for anyone injured or killed without thinking about anything else, would remember what I'd told her in the heat of battle...

"You can stop repeating yourself, Kazuma. I understand perfectly well. You just need to trust me. Still, I can't help feeling a bit bad about this one. And not like normal—like you might shuffle off the mortal coil, but whatever. It's like...this is going to be one we can't take back."

"Stop it, moron—that's enough out of you! Why do you like death flags so much?! Today of all days, just do what I tell you, all right? Even if somebody dies, do *not* pop out in front. Your job is support from a nice, *safe* location. As long as you're alive and we can collect the bodies, then we can make do. You understand me?"

Aqua nodded. I finally felt like I had repeated myself enough times that even with her famous inability to read a situation, I thought we would be okay.

"Have you finished your little chat?" Megumin asked. "All right, a little something for each of you from me. Starting with Kazuma—I'm giving some of this back to you, just in case it becomes necessary." She reached into the backpack she'd been carting around so carefully and started handing out manatite to everyone who could use magic. First, she pressed five of the crystals on me. Then she took out a single stone for Yunyun.

"Wow! I've never seen such a big piece of manatite! Are you sure? Can I really have...? H-heh, Megumin! Hey, come on! If you're going to give it to me, then give it already!"

Megumin wasn't letting go of the rock. "This is a precious gift I received from Kazuma," she said. "Use it thoughtfully, all right? Seriously, save it for when you really, truly need it. For I my very self received it as a gift!"

"Yeah, fine, I get it; you're happy to have a present—you don't need to brag about it! I'll be careful with it, I promise!" Yunyun, finally in possession of the manatite chunk, looked at it with her eyes sparkling.

Aqua watched the scene, brimming with anticipation. "Neat, Megumin! Where's my piece?"

"You don't need one, do you, Aqua? We've been together for quite a long time, yet I've never known you to run out of MP, so— Hey! What are you doing? This is very precious stuff! Anyway, if I gave you some manatite, you wouldn't even use it; you'd just sell it!"

I ignored the tug-of-war over the manatite that had started between the two, instead putting my own pieces away in my pouch

and taking up position once more in the shadow of the door. I activated Sense Foe and was greeted with a veritable barrage of dangerous auras on the other side.

Ahhh. I'd figured that if the Demon King could strengthen his minions, he would just keep them all at his side. But the knights we'd faced in this room were essentially the overflow from his chamber.

Darkness, standing beside me, started to smile at me—now, of all moments! “Kazuma... Do you remember when I joined this party? You said that you and Aqua might not look like much but that you swore you were going to defeat the Demon King. I never envisioned it happening quite like this...”

Geez, I couldn't believe she actually remembered that. “Quit it! Going all memory lane at a moment like this is a death flag for sure. At least pick something fun, something to get me in the spirit. You know, like tell me that if I defeat the Demon King, you'll let me have a harem so that I can leave plenty of successors to the hero's bloodline.”

“Y-you hopeless man... To the bitter end...! No. I suppose this is perfectly like you. Wait... If you defeat the Demon King? If you... defeat...” Suddenly her expression went from a wry smile to one of shock. “Ahhh! Kazuma, do you still have that ring?! The one you stole from Iris when you snuck into the castle?”

Whoa, hold on! “Pipe down—Mitsurugi's right here! That doesn't even matter anyway; why would you bring it up?”

“N-no, it does matter. I can't ignore what I just heard... You snuck into the castle and stole a ring from Lady Iris?” Mitsurugi, who had been standing behind me and Darkness getting his gear ready and had apparently heard everything, looked at me like he had some sort of objection to raise.

“How he got it doesn't matter now!” Darkness exclaimed. “The ring matters! You still have it, don't you?!”

“Yes! Yes, I still have it. It's back in my room at the mansion, in the same place I keep my precious ero books.” That was my little sister's cherished ring, after all. I wouldn't want anything to happen to it. I kept it safely in a box with my other valuables.

“Your—! You can't keep the royal family's ring with a bunch of porn! Listen to me! You have to let somebody else strike the final blow against the Demon King! Hrm... But if Mitsurugi was to do it, that could be problematic, too... Arrrrgh! I'll take the arch-fiend's head myself!”

“What's gotten into you? Trying to grab the glory all of a sudden? You always pretend not to care about money, but now you're showing your true, greedy colors, you bankrupt noble!”

“I'm not worried about anything as basic as money! I don't care *who* does it, as long as it's not you or Mitsurugi!”

Megumin raised her hand. "In that case, I call dibs on the title of Slayer of the Demon King."

"Don't make things any more complicated than they already are, Megumin! You can't use Explosion indoors anyway! Trust me, if Kazuma defeats the Demon King, you'll regret it just as much as I will! Say something to him, Aqua!"

"That doesn't bother me nearly as much as that armor of yours, Darkness. It's gotten awfully cruel-looking since I saw you last. It seems to me like it's cursed. But I'll break it for you. Although that might cause the armor to disappear..."

Darkness grabbed Aqua before she could launch into her curse-breaking spell, slapping a hand over her mouth to keep her from intoning any magic.

How was it that we were standing one door away from the final battle, and yet we were just wasting our time bickering?

"If our combined efforts can take the Demon King down the normal way, then it doesn't matter if I don't assassinate him. You know what we're getting ourselves into, though, right? As far as I know, Darkness, no one in Axel has better stamina or Magic Resistance than you do. If even you can't withstand the Demon King's attacks, I don't think there's anyone who will be able to take him down."

If even Darkness's endurance and Aqua's healing powers weren't enough to protect us from the Demon King, then we had no choice but to give up on fighting fair; we'd have to resort to having Megumin drop explosions on him from a distance. And that would work only if the Demon King was willing to stick around in this castle now that the barrier was gone.

Oops. Darkness was smacking my chest with the flat of her fist and giving me a little smile. "I might not be good for anything else, but for protection, you can count on me." It was a strange moment for the normally helpless, retiring Crusader. Until this point, Darkness had always been something of an unsung hero, serving as our shield. If she could have had it together like this more often, instead of getting all *pant-pant* or turning impatient and angry, I might even have been able to muster an earnest word of thanks.

"I've always pursued the path of the female knight, but I never imagined my dream of being sexually tortured by the Demon King might actually come true. Kazuma... You have my profound thanks."

"I was about to say something similar, but, um...I take it back."

Aqua, Megumin, Darkness—to the bitter, bitter end, they had to be this way...

As we waited for Aqua to finish buffing all of us, I looked at each of the others in turn and nodded.

“Demon King! Prepare to—”

“Cursed Lightning!”

“Cursed Lightning!!”

“Cursed Lightning!!!”

The instant she stepped through the door several dozen blasts of dark lightning came crashing down on Darkness.

“Hey!” I couldn’t help exclaiming from the shadow of the door at the incredible sight I was seeing. Cursed Lightning, as I recalled, was the brutal electrical magic Wiz had used to eviscerate the dragon in that dungeon.

Darkness’s body spasmed with the blows. “Curse you! Launching a magical attack without even introducing yourself? How cowardly can you get? And yet, you dare to call yourself the Demon King?! Show yourself!” Black smoke rising from her armor, Darkness went charging into the room!

Huh? I would have said that was pretty deadly magic they just hit her with...

As I hid by the door, marveling at just how tough Darkness was, everyone else went pouring into the room after her. Yunyun was letting fly with some kind of magic. I heard an awful voice from inside, terrible enough to make my heart ache.

“Pardon my minions for being so rude! Yes, what you say has some logic. Well, you intruders have certainly smashed up my castle well enough. Are you heroes...or fools? Now, show me your pow—”

“Infernoooo!!”

“Hrgh?!” the owner of the awful voice cried.

That must have been Yunyun with the enthusiastic spell. The heat of the blast wind even reached me where I was standing by the open door.

“Hey...! Yunyun, I told you to save that manatite for when you absolutely, positively needed it most! What are you doing burning it out the moment we get in the room?!” That would be Megumin, exclaiming angrily. Guess Yunyun used up the manatite in one go. It wasn’t like Yunyun to do something like that. I wondered which devil or street punk had gotten her ear.

“Crimson Magickers, eh? You never do things halfway.”

“S-sorry! It’s just, uh, a no-good friend of mine said, ‘So you’re dropping by the Demon King’s place, huh? That obnoxious S.O.B... If you see him, give him one for us!’ So I thought I needed to...” Ah, the Goody Two-shoes had finally fallen. “My name is Yunyun! Arch-wizard and

wielder of advanced magic! Foremost magic-user of the Crimson Magic Clan and, as such, she who will be the next chief! And I'm going to show you what a Crimson Magic Clanner can really do!"

"Yes...you lot certainly have been a thorn in my side. Very well. Show me your power, O future chief of the Crimson Magic Clan!"

Wow! Forget the fights with the generals we'd had. *This* was the fantasy world I'd been looking for—this very final showdown with the Demon King!

"How dare you put on such an awesome performance and leave me completely out of it! To think, you normally refuse to even say that stuff for sheer embarrassment! And after you struck a blow with *my* manatite!"

"Ow! Ow! Stop it, Megumin! Not now!"

I couldn't see the girls from where I was, but I could take a pretty good guess at what was happening. Seriously, what *was* Megumin thinking, pulling that crap right at this moment?

At the same time, I heard a whole bunch of monsters shouting and roaring from inside the room. As if in defiance, Darkness yelled, "*Decoy!*"

"Demon King! I'm coming for you!" Mitsurugi cried, and then there was a crashing of swords. I heard magical booms and bangs and Darkness laughing, her excitement driven through the roof by the cursed armor.

I didn't know how long the fighting had gone on before I heard Megumin cry, "Darkness, you can't hold them all on your own! You need to decrease the power of your Decoy skill a bit!"

I guess she was still holding out by herself against all the enemy's attacks. She hadn't even flinched in the face of General Winter. I knew she wasn't about to back down here and now.

At this rate, though, it looked like the battle could drag on. The number of enemy auras I sensed hadn't decreased at all, leaving me worried that Darkness would be the first one to cry uncle. There were exactly ten enemies in the room—the same number we'd defeated during the fight here in the antechamber. In other words, it should have been a manageable number, if they hadn't all been buffed to hell by the Demon King's abilities.

And *that* meant that if I could only take out the Demon King, we might just win this thing!

My time had come at last. It was fine, by which I mean it was low-risk. I could do this!

I activated Ambush and sneaked into the increasingly noisy chamber. I was wearing my cloak like a hood as I crept along. I might've looked silly, like a kid trying to pretend no one could see me, but this was the skill that had activated when I was in the dark

shadows along the wall. I thought back to when Chris had taught me this ability. She'd hidden in a barrel right in front of me and been quite proud of how well she was concealed.

As I worked my way along, silent and sneaky, I took a glance around the room from under my cloak hood. Darkness was right in the middle of the chamber, putting on one heck of a show with the bad guys. Maybe her attacks never hit, but the way she swung that great sword, her face red, must have looked awfully threatening. Combined with Decoy, all the attacks naturally came her way, but even after a pretty thorough beating by a group of enemies powered up by the Demon King, she didn't look remotely like she was going to give in.

"What is she made of? Iron?!" one of the Demon King's bodyguards shouted. I glanced in his direction to find three wizard types in black robes, along with four knights. Then there was another *oni*, with the big horns growing out of his head, and some sort of grim reaper, a skeleton in a robe holding a scythe.

And there, at the very farthest end of the room, was a man barking orders. I couldn't make out his face under his hood, but I figured that had to be him. The Demon King.

This was my chance!

He wasn't even wearing any armor. If I could just get around behind him, one good stab would do the trick. I started sneaking forward again...

"You, there! Whaddaya think you're doing?"

Before I knew what was happening, the grim reaper was standing in front of me. *Shit! Ambush skill, where did you go?!*

The specter of death raised his scythe.

Aqua shouted, "Kazumaaaaa!"

Ah. So that's it. Hadn't she told me, back when we'd delved that dungeon?

I pulled my hood back, striking out with my sword. The grim reaper's arm moved so fast, it was practically a blur. And then suddenly, the floor was coming closer...

Down in the dungeon, Aqua had told me that Ambush didn't work on the undead.

“Power Up!”

Suddenly, someone was casting magic at me.

I was in the usual white room. I guess I'd gotten my head chopped off or something. I was dead. Yet again. I stood stock-still and said, “Uh, Lady Eris, what are you doing?”

I was wondering about the sudden magic, but she responded only by exclaiming, *“Protection!”*

What was going on here? I could actually feel additional effects from the spells. Aqua was supposed to have buffed me already, but maybe different sects had slightly different spells or something. But that still left a question.

“Lady Eris, um, why are you casting magic on me?”

“Resistance! Why, so you can get back into the fight as soon as my senior goddess resurrects you, of course,” she said.

Uhhhh...no.

“Cut me some slack, Lady Eris. We're already screwed on this one. I'll be honest with you—I didn't even think about the fact that there might be undead there.” I sat down and kicked out my feet. “I really thought things were gonna go fine this time.”

It had worked so well on that guy Mammon, I figured, *why shouldn't it work again?* But I guess as good as my Luck was, I couldn't expect everything to go my way. Dammit! Aqua had raised the death flag with all that talk about bad feelings, and I was the one who'd bought it. When we got home, I was going to give her a piece of my mind.

“I don't know what you mean. This isn't over. Your friends are still fighting the Demon King,” Eris said. “I admit the situation doesn't look great for you, but— Oh! Oh! Darkness's Decoy skill finally gave out, and now Mitsu...Mitsurugi, was it? He's surrounded by enemies...! ...Oh, phew! Yunyun blew them away with a magical blast.”

Eris was looking into thin air, emotions wrenching her expression one way and then another. I wished she would stop feeding my freshly retired body all these shocking twists.

“No, look, we've got a plan. If anyone dies, we abandon the fight, collect the body, and teleport right out of there. I'm sure they'll start trying to get away any minute.”

I was sitting on the floor, practically limp, but Eris cocked her head. “No, no one's given up yet. In fact, Megumin is positively over the edge, and even Yunyun looks fired up. Megumin is waving her staff around and saying something about *‘my lifelong friend and rival, let us take revenge for Kazuma!’* She looks like she might drop an explosion right there in the middle of that little room. And Darkness is shouting about killing them all...”

N-no, Megumin, stop... Don't egg them all on... And Darkness! She was supposed to be a well-bred noblewoman. Why did she have to be so impatient? I was mentally demanding why they didn't get the hell out of there, but to be fair, the one who had died was, well, me. If it had been Mitsurugi or Darkness or Yunyun, the tide of battle would have turned on the spot—but it wasn't, and I guess they didn't want to give up this chance to take out the Demon King.

Okay, so it wasn't quite what we'd planned, but I was sure that if things got too ugly, they'd get out of there. I only wondered whether, if it came to that, they'd forget the plan completely and leave my corpse lying there in the Demon King's chamber.

N-no. They wouldn't do that. They'd make sure to grab my body on the way out. Wouldn't they?

I was starting to fret a little, but Eris smiled at me. "Call me cruel, but I'm going to have you move on. This is the first time I've broken the rules on my own initiative and not because my senior goddess was being pushy, so I'm a bit nervous, but..."

Nervous, right. Eris was grinning excitedly.

"No, hey, I can't do it, Lady Eris. Even Mitsurugi seemed to be struggling with those guys. What do you think I'm going to contribute to a battle like that? I'm the weakest class, and I don't even have any cheats, remember? Let me ask you something. Does stuff like poison or Backstabbing even work on the Demon King? I mean, it happens all the time in games, right? Boss characters are immune to poison and insta-kill attacks and stuff."

"Hmm. You're right—I don't think poison would affect the Demon King. One-hit-kill attacks probably wouldn't work, either..." Eris smiled, with just a touch of pain.

Huh, so my sneak-attack plan wouldn't have worked anyway.

"That's even *more* reason I can't do anything, then. My stats suck compared to other adventurers'. All I've got going for me is my good Luck. Look, I don't mean to complain too much, but I think it's kind of amazing that I've even made it this far with abilities like these, isn't it? Not to toot my own horn, but..." Eris was just listening to my pathetic moaning with a little smile. "Well, I got sent to another world with nothing but the tracksuit on my back. I spent my whole life as a pampered shut-in, and then suddenly I was sleeping in a stable and doing hard physical labor. Then I had to make my own fortune at the same time as I was trying to keep my friends out of trouble, and before I knew it, I was mired in debt. And no sooner do I think I've paid my way out than I'm caught up with a bunch of big-trouble types, dragged into one dangerous thing and then another."

Geez, a moment like this, and it seemed like I couldn't stop whining. The worst of my experiences just kept rolling through my

mind.

“Would it have killed someone to let me have at least a few good memories? Hell, even I think I’ve gotten pretty twisted since arriving here. Who wouldn’t? I was always a shut-in, but now I feel like an awful human being, too...”

Eris didn’t say anything about my litany, just listened silently...
And then she giggled.

“But you had fun, didn’t you?”

...That wasn’t fair.

“Well... Yeah. I guess.”

“I thought so.” Eris was smiling, as if she thought I should be impressed with her.

Aw, Chief... You’re so cute.

“Your friends haven’t given up. Wouldn’t it be lonely if you just retired to the afterlife all by yourself? That’s why I want to make sure you’re ready to jump back into the fray whenever my senior goddess resurrects you.”

I appreciated the sentiment, but there was a problem. “The thing is, that’s not going to happen. I made it absolutely, positively crystal clear to her: If anyone died, she was supposed to stay back where she was, not go running over to them.” So... “So I guess you cast all that magic on me for nothing,” I almost whispered.

Eris, though, nodded confidently. “Oh, I see. Anyway, let’s continue, shall we? *Haste!*”

It was like she hadn’t heard a word I’d said. Did *all* goddesses refuse to listen to people?

No sooner had I had that thought than a voice echoed around the white room, a voice I absolutely should not have been hearing.

“Kazuma! Kazumaaaa!!”

It was Aqua, ignoring what I had told her to the bitter, bitter end. What did that idiot think she was doing, prancing through the middle of a battle? If she died, *no one* would be coming back to life! Did she even understand that?! And after I’d warned her as forcefully as I could to stay back. And when she’d acted so scared of the Demon King...

“Kazuma, we’re in trouble in more ways than one! Megumin’s started chanting Explosion!”

That made me sit up and take notice.

I turned to Eris, who was grinning openly. “*Why* does she never listen?”

“No idea. Don’t you think that’s part of what makes her lovable?”

I didn’t think she was lovable, and I *did* think that when we got home, I was going to lecture her until she burst into tears.

Eris, however, looked at me and said, “Kazuma, do you know you’re smiling?” She sounded as if she couldn’t be having more fun if she tried. Well, this was a pickle... She always seemed all kinds of vulnerable as the chief, but in her goddess form, I found Eris leading me around by the nose. And it killed me that I could never seem to say no to her when she smiled.

I finally stood, smacking myself on the cheeks to pump myself up.

“Yeesh, what does that idiot take me for? Gotta admit, though, I’m impressed she was able to pull off a resurrection in the middle of a battle,” I said, walking toward the door back to the real world that had appeared in the middle of the room.

“And Darkness is still fending off the Demon King and his bodyguards all by herself. Hee-hee! Even the arch-fiend and his personal troops aren’t sure what to do about her toughness! I wish you could see how annoyed the Demon King looks right now,” Eris said, giggling.

Well, yeah. Our Crusader had enviably high defense if nothing else. She was definitely the toughest in Axel—maybe in the whole world.

I kept trying to tell myself that if Darkness could show some guts at a moment like this, so could I. But the thought of the enemy we were fighting still brought a sigh to my lips. “The Demon King, huh...?”

This was a real battle with a real final boss. First, we’d dealt with all those generals, and now this... Why did it always have to be the most powerful enemies for me? That stuff about my Luck being high must have been a load of nonsense...

As I reached the door, I turned to see Eris looking at me expectantly, her fist clenched in front of her chest. I said, “Just to be clear, you know I don’t have a plan, right? I can tell you exactly what’s going to happen if I rejoin that battle. But... Hey, I’ve come this far. Might as well show up for the finale.”

I doubt I sounded very inspiring, but Eris gave me a serious look

and said, "Let me offer you just one piece of advice, then. My senior goddess is with you in this battle. You might not believe it, but she's a real goddess with powerful abilities. She can even temporarily weaken the Demon King's powers."

"She can?! Geez, that almost makes her sound like a real goddess! ...But wait, that moron never said a word about that."

"I think m-maybe she forgot about it..."

.....Was Aqua *really* a goddess with actual, powerful powers? I did remember one time she'd threatened to "seal" the lower half of my body with a seal so powerful, no human being would ever be able to undo it. And she'd used a seal, too, after Chris had stolen the divine necklace from Iris. So maybe...?

"So it sounds like the Demon King's most dangerous ability is that he can boost the stats of any monsters around him. Can she nerf that, too?"

"I'm afraid not. She can only weaken the Demon King's physical traits, his Magic Resistance, his Magic Power, that sort of thing... But speaking of lowering his Magic Resistance, I've got a hint for you. You can use Teleport, right, Kazuma?"

Bingo!

"With the king's resistance lowered so that even my magic can work on him, I could teleport him right to the Axel police station! And then all the adventurers in town could dogpile on him!"

"N-no, that's not what I meant! Remember that a detachment from the Demon King's army is attacking Axel right now! The battle is still open at the moment, but if the Demon King was to appear there, the detachment would be strengthened, and the town would be annihilated in an instant."

Shoot, I'd forgotten about the siege on the town...

"So what am I supposed to do?" I asked.

Eris raised her pointer finger. "One of your Teleport destinations is the bottom of that dungeon, right?" She looked at me like this should make perfect sense, like a kid who thinks they're being really clever.

Ah! I was supposed to dump the Demon King at the bottom of the dungeon and strand him there!

"So I take him to the bottom of the dungeon and just leave him to die! Ooh, Lady Eris, you're a nasty one. I think it's a good plan, though."

"No! That's still not what I meant! There might be plenty of monsters down there, but the Demon King could easily bend them to his will. It would be no trouble for him to waltz out of that dungeon. And that's why I want to ask you for a little favor, Kazuma..."

I had a bad feeling about this.

“Perhaps you would be so kind as to defeat the Demon King...one-on-one?”

She was even crazier than Aqua.

“No! Nuh-uh. Noooooo happening. Impossible with a capital I-M-P-O-S-S-I-B-L-E. Tell you what. Maybe I could take Mitsurugi, Yunyun, and Aqua with me to the dungeon along with the Demon King, then let Aqua buff Mitsurugi and Yunyun; then the two of them could let loose on him and then Yunyun could teleport us home. Our chances of success are waaaaay higher with a plan like that.”

I thought it was a good suggestion, but Eris shook her head. “For starters, I would assume the Demon King can use Teleport himself, so in that situation, he’d just zip right back to his castle.”

“Then wouldn’t he just do that anyway, whether we all came with him or just me?”

Eris sort of smirked. “An important part of the Demon King’s job is to face a brave adventurer in combat and be gloriously defeated. If he was to run away from a lone adventurer challenging him to a fight, he would hardly be the Demon King anymore.”

You know, I felt like I’d heard something similar before. Hadn’t Vanir or Wiz said something like that down in the dungeon? That at the end, the Demon King had to fight a brave hero in a dramatic battle and be defeated...dramatically? And that that was what made him the Demon King or something?

“Y-yeah, okay... But then wouldn’t it be better to send Mitsurugi or someone along with the Demon King? He actually *wants* to be a brave hero or whatever.” I hated to admit it, but in a straight fight, that guy stood a much better chance than I did.

“I really don’t think that would work. Mitsurugi only knows how to use his sword; in a dark dungeon, I don’t think he’d have a chance against the king of the demons. But you... You, Kazuma, with your plethora of skills and your ability to adapt to any situation—with you, there might actually be some hope. And besides...” She clasped her hands in front of her chest, her eyes sparkling. “A boy from the weakest class, with no distinctive abilities at all, defeating the Demon King. Doesn’t that sound way cooler?!”

What a thing to say. I guess she did have a righteous-thief thing going. Maybe she liked those manga with crazy, melodramatic plot twists or whatever.

Then, as if to give me one more push, we heard:

“Kazuma! Kazumaaaa!”

It was Aqua, sounding like she was on the verge of tears—definitely not quite in the spirit of our very serious discussion.

“Aw, geez. She’s always making fun of me. Why would she rely on me when it counts most?” I said, but even as I spoke, I was bracing myself to fight the Demon King.

Eris’s expression as she looked at me wasn’t that of a pure, self-serious goddess. “Well, obviously, it’s because she trusts you. I always knew you were a *tsundere*, Lowly Assistant. You might complain, but my senior goddess has you wrapped around her little finger.”

No, the look on her face was the same mischievous smile my “friend” often wore.

“And I always knew *you* were a cute one, Chief. What do you say—once I’ve gotten rid of the Demon King, will you marry me?”

“Oh, sure. But you’ll tell Megumin and Darkness for me, won’t you, Lowly Assistant?” Eris giggled, accustomed to my teasing by now, I guess.

“Shoot, really? Now, that’s the inspiration I needed to *really* fight. I’ll let Megumin and Darkness know right now that I’m gonna marry Chris!”

“N-no, I’m sorry, please don’t! I don’t want the two of them to get mad at you! I was just teasing you back!”

Okay, so maybe my chief, still adorably demure beneath her facade of confidence, wasn’t quite used to my teasing yet.

I grinned at how Eris was getting all bent out of shape, but we heard Aqua again:

“Kazumaaa! Kazumaaaaa!”

Yeesh, and just when Eris and I were having a nice moment. Did she do this stuff on purpose? I was so annoyed, the first thing I was going to do when I returned to life was chew her out.

“At this very moment, many people are fighting all over the land—in the town of Axel and in the capital, both of which are besieged by the Demon King’s forces.” Eris snapped her fingers, and the white door in front of me opened. “In Axel, the friends with whom you’ve adventured, shared drinks, laughed, and argued are resisting a brutal push by the detachment. And in the capital, a squadron of knights led by the king himself is standing shoulder to shoulder with adventurers from Japan and hand-picked forces from the Crimson Magic Clan.” She’d sounded serious to this point, but then she chuckled. “And a brave young girl who regards you as an older brother, wearing the holy armor Aegis, has joined forces with an Axis disciple and Megumin’s Crimson Magic friend to face the Demon King’s daughter in combat.”

“Say what?!” I jerked back in shock. What a thing to hear at this moment!

I didn’t know exactly what was going on, but I guess they were in big enough trouble that Iris herself had to take the field? I really wondered what the story was, why Iris had teamed up with Aegis, and who these friends of hers were. Setting aside the Axis disciple, Megumin’s Crimson Magic friend must be one of her classmates...

“The way this world works is, when the Demon King is born, monsters all over the world gradually increase in strength. And when the Demon King is felled, all monsters immediately get substantially weaker. You understand what that means, don’t you, Kazuma?”

Now, Chief, that just isn’t fair. How could I not go defeat the Demon King after hearing something like that? Well... Then again, maybe she’d told me because she knew I was already inspired to go do it. But geez, if she’d mentioned that a little sooner, maybe she would have been able to convince me more easily. Funny time to stand on principle.

“Thanks, that only makes me even more eager to go for it. If even my little sister is out there fighting, then I’d better take down the Demon King and help her.”

I started toward the door, but Eris had one more thing to say.

“I’ve got one final parting gift for you before you head back to the mortal plane, Lowly Assistant.”

I guess her work as a goddess was over, because she switched back to sounding like my friend Chris. She held out her hands toward me. This was great. She’d already given me a ton of buffs, but if I was going to take on the Demon King, I sure wanted every advantage I could possibly have.

“This is one bit of magic where I know I can hold my own even beside my senior goddess! In the name of the goddess of good luck, I give you my very best blessing! *Blessing!*”

With that very encouraging spell cast on me, I turned to go through the door for real. With my already good Luck now boosted to almost unfair levels, I was really starting to get into this.

I can do it. Maybe never before and maybe never again, but I can do it right now.

With both Aqua’s and Chris’s magic backing me up, I was ready to go.

But leave it to the densest person in any room to take a chunk out of my motivation. She hardly sounded worried at all as she said:

“Kazuma, Kazumaaa! Come on, quick! Hurry!”



.....

I traded a look with Chris and smiled. Then I shouted into the air, “Looks like I’ve got no freakin’ choiiiiice!”

Chris grinned at the way I shouted back at Aqua. “All right. Go forth,” I heard my cherished friend—both the goddess and my chief—say from behind me, “to slay the Demon King!”

A stereotypical but perfect way to send me off. I charged through the door!

4

“Megumin, I don’t care! Wipe these sons of bitches out! I’ll protect the rest of you like a human wall! We know for a fact that I can absorb one of your explosions!”

“Very well. If we die, we die together! And in the event you prove unable to defend us, after letting off so many explosions in a single day and then ultimately confronting the Demon King, I have no regrets for my life! And as long as all of us are together, I’m not even scared!”

“Stoop! Megumin, wait! Don’t take out Darkness!”

Hell of a conversation to come back to.

When I came around, I found myself looking straight into Aqua’s eyes. The soft, warm feeling at the back of my head must have been her lap, where she’d propped me up.

“Ah! You finally came back, Kazuma!” Aqua said, pleased to see me conscious again.

I scrambled to a sitting position and quickly took stock of the situation. What I saw was—

“Your Majesty, stay behind us!”

“Hey, you there, Crimson Magic wizard! Do you know what you’re doing?! If you use Explosion in a room like this, you’ll take yourself out along with us!”

What I saw was Megumin, threatening the Demon King and his minions with her staff, which glowed with an Explosion spell ready to go off, and Darkness, weaponless and covered in wounds but defending Megumin all the same.

Then there were the Demon King’s bodyguards—holding position in front of their liege—and Yunyun, all desperately trying to talk Megumin down.

Mitsurugi was on one knee—maybe he’d been hurt in the fighting

—and his two girlfriends stood protectively in front of him. When I looked for the grim reaper who had taken me out in spite of my Ambush skill, I found a bloodstain on the floor where I'd been killed, along with Darkness's sword, broken in half, and a big scythe lying on the ground. I guess the grim reaper had eaten a serious counterattack from Aqua.

I rose unsteadily to my feet and saw looks of relief on Megumin's and Darkness's faces as they glanced over and noticed me. It looked like we had a stalemate going on, but at the moment, the Demon King and his bodyguards weren't paying any attention to Aqua or me. I guess I didn't blame them, considering the dangerous light glinting from the end of Megumin's staff.

While the king's guards tried to convince Megumin to back down, Aqua said urgently to me, "Kazuma, you need to chant Teleport now. We'll all get out of here. As soon as you and Yunyun are ready to transport us, Megumin can unleash her spell on that balcony over there, and we can escape!"

But I told her, "Aqua, I need you to listen very carefully to what I'm about to say. For once in your life, listen to me, okay? Lady Eris just told me that you can weaken the Demon King's power."

Aqua, however, only said, "Kazuma... What are you talking about? You think I can do something as goddess-like as that? Are you feeling all right? Come on—we need you to get it together."

.....

"*You* get it together! I think you're forgetting what class you are! And you *are* a goddess!"

"Oh yeah! That's right—now that you mention it, I am a goddess, aren't I? And with my holy goddess powers, I can take aim at the Demon King and..... Hey, hold on... I can weaken the Demon King by putting a seal on him, but that's it, all right? And it doesn't look like the king has any intention of joining the battle anyway. I don't think weakening him would do us much good."

"No, you make him vulnerable, and I'll do the rest... Whatever 'the rest' is. Looks like you took care of that grim reaper guy. That means I can make use of Ambush again."

At that, a dark look came over Aqua's face. "You still want to do this, Kazuma? Come on... Let's go home, okay? We can get out of here, and let the government handle the Demon King, and we can all have a nice, happy life together. If money's the problem, well, I wouldn't normally do it, but I could earn some cash with my performances. But only until we're back on our feet, okay? Not forever. So let's—"

I held out my hand to stop her from saying any more. And then I gave her my most serious look. "Just watch me. We've come this far

together. Surely you trust me at least a little bit to pull something out at a time like this.”

“It’s *because* I’ve known you so long that I don’t trust you one bit.”

Maybe I really should smack her. Here I was trying to sound cool for once, and she’d just dismissed me. I grabbed Aqua and said, “Screw! That! *You* just get ready to weaken the Demon King!”

“Ow! Owie! That hurts! Okay, fine. I just need to do that thing, right?”

I kept Aqua in a near-iron grip as I explained what was going to happen. “Listen up. Once you make the Demon King vulnerable, I’m going to use Ambush again to get close to him. Then I’m going to kidnap him using Teleport. I’ll take him to the bottom of the world’s deepest dungeon and finish him off.”

“No... Does that mean my poor, shrimp Kazuma is going to take on the Demon King all by himself? My unclouded goddess’s intuition perceives nothing but a death flag at the end of that path!”

Was she never satisfied until she had completely torn down my motivation?

“There’s more than one way to skin a Demon King. And if things really look bad, I’ll just teleport myself to Axel. If the Demon King doesn’t come back here, then just assume I finished him off and go back to town with Yunyun’s Teleport. Even if I can’t beat him, I’ll try to buy you some time. You guys use it to take out the guards in this chamber. Without the king around, they’ll get weaker, too, and you should be able to handle them.”

If the Demon King *did* come back, his buddies would be gone, and my friends could just use him as a punching bag.

The further I got into my plan, though, the more unhappy Aqua looked. “What happens if you drop dead down in that dungeon? You always seem to get badly hurt in dungeons, and anyway, what if some hungry monster eats you?”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. Look... If things turn ugly, I’ll get the hell out of there. Even if I run out of MP, I’ve got that manatite with me, so I’ll be able to use Teleport.”

We needed to get moving or we would lose the element of surprise from my being resurrected.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! When the Demon King is defeated, then I shall be the new Demon King...!”

“Megumin, calm down! You can’t become the new Demon King just because the old one gets defeated! I see how red your eyes are... but it’s just a bluff, right?! When the adventurers saw us off from Axel, they said they would treat us to a meal when we got back! But that’s only if we get home alive!”

I looked over and, yep, still a stalemate.

That was when Darkness glanced at me and caught my eye...only to immediately avert her gaze again. Almost like she was trying not to let the Demon King and his forces notice me. But I thought Megumin was doing a pretty good job of providing a distraction. Maybe she was expecting me to resume the original plan, where I would stab the Demon King in the back.

“All right, I’m on my way. After I’ve teleported out of here, Aqua, I want you to let Megumin and the others know what’s going on. Be sure to tell them that I’ll teleport home if things get dangerous, okay? Otherwise, she might lose it again.”

I was just about to activate Ambush, but Aqua grabbed my sleeve and wouldn’t let go. “Kazuma... Why are you so bent on defeating the Demon King?” she asked anxiously. But she looked almost...eager. Like she thought I might say, *It’s all for your sake*, or something else awesome like that. I felt a flash of annoyance at the way her eyes sparkled, the way she was so obviously transported with the idea that she was a goddess seeing off her brave hero.

“It’s definitely *not* for your sake or whatever,” I said.

“This one time of all times, can’t you say something nice, like, *I’m doing it all for you, O goddess?! ...*Listen, you *tsundere* NEET. If things get dangerous, you *will* run home, won’t you? You’re such a shrimp, Kazuma, I’m scared one good hit from the Demon King will straight-up kill you.”

Shrimp! Bah.

“I know that. Trust me. Or what—you think I’m the kind of guy who would be cool enough to try to take the Demon King in a fair fight? NEETs have one defining characteristic. We give up easily.”

“Yeah, I know. You all give up too easily, and you’re all cowards. And you get caught up in the moment too quickly, and you’re super awkward.” She was one to talk about ruining a moment... Couldn’t she just give me well wishes and send me on my way? “And I know that no matter what happens, you always come through somehow in the nick of time. So go kick the Demon King’s butt. Just try not to get yourself killed.”

Aqua looked right at me, real confidence in her smiling face.

I crept along the wall, hidden beneath my cloak. The last thing I looked like was a brave warrior about to defeat the final boss, but I’d given up on the awesome heroics a long time ago.

As I edged nearer to the king, Aqua closed her eyes and spread her arms in a gesture of prayer. And then she started to glow with a light so bright, it filled the entire room.

Huh! For once, she almost looked like a real goddess.

“O my servants who exist in this world,” the firefly goddess began to intone, a drop of sweat falling from her brow. “I, Aqua, goddess of water, command you...”

Whatever she was doing, it wasn't something you saw every day, and it got the attention of the Demon King and his lackeys. It looked like they wanted to stop Aqua, but Megumin's threat had them pinned down.

Finally, Aqua slowly opened her eyes and exclaimed: “A seal upon those who are unclean!”

It was pretty quick, as incantations go; it almost sounded like she was just making up the words on the fly. And yet, at her proclamation, the room was filled with a sense of purity and cleanliness. I'd sort of flinched when she'd said, “those who are unclean,” but I guess her spell gave me a pass.

The Demon King's bodyguards formed a wall, trying to protect their master from the light.

That was, until Darkness, covered in wounds, cried:

“Decoy!”

...and came charging straight at them.

“Huh?! Protect the Demon King! Hold the line!” one of the guards shouted, but Darkness slammed into him, and the Demon King was bathed in Aqua's light.

I looked for Mitsurugi, wondering where the hell he was. I saw him finally getting to his feet; maybe Aqua had sent some healing magic his way. Good! That meant the others would have a chance against the bodyguards after I made tracks with the Demon King.

While Darkness was feeding the bodyguards knuckle sandwiches and keeping their attention with Decoy, I managed to get around behind the big guy himself...

My first impression of the Demon King up close was that he was a tall, elderly man. I could see a pair of horns poking out from underneath his white hair, but other than that, he looked more or less human. Between the over-the-top black robe and a dark mist that emanated from his body, strengthening his followers, though, anybody who saw him would agree he deserved to be called the Demon King.

“It's a bluff!” the king was shouting. “That Crimson Magic girl is never going to fire. Focus on the man with the enchanted sword, not that Crusader! And the other Crimson Magic girl, too!”

That earned a twitch of Megumin's temple. *Shit, man, don't*

antagonize her! She'll do it; she really will!

"Damn it all... I never imagined an actual goddess had appeared in this world... So the light that descended on the beginner town was this slack-jawed deity?" The Demon King was mumbling to himself, looking annoyed about Aqua—with his back to me.

What should I do? Should I change the plan again and try Deadly Backstab on him? But if I failed, it would all be over. And anyway, Eris had said that poison and one-hit-kill attacks probably wouldn't work on him.

All right, Teleport, then...!

"The goddess of water of all things...! Isn't your purview supposed to be some other world? What, did you get the urge to come riding to the rescue of your junior goddess?" The Demon King sounded pretty annoyed by Aqua's presence. Anyway, it was, uh, mostly my fault that she was here. *Very sorry, sir.*

Ugh. He really is scary up close.

The Demon King was standing with his undefended back to me. This was my chance, right here before my eyes. All I had to do was take it.

Courage... If only I had something to inspire some courage in me...!

At that moment, I felt as if Darkness met my eyes, even though I was using Ambush. No... I didn't just feel it. Our eyes actually met. And not just mine and Darkness's, either. I found Megumin looking at me, too. They both looked away almost as soon as they had glanced at me, but I saw the hope in their eyes, the little smiles on their faces...

Then my gaze settled on Aqua, who had a look of pure trust in me on her face, as if to say her work here was done.

It was time to stop hoping for some kind of cheat ability. No legendary magic swords, no incredible talents, no unbeatable powers. I didn't need them.

Please, Lady Eris...

Please...Aqua.

Give this gutless shut-in the courage to vanquish the Demon King!

"...?! When the hell did you get there?!" the Demon King demanded, turning around. But I was already jumping at him, crying:

"Teleport!"

Chapter 4

Glory for This Adventurer!

1

I was standing before a ridiculously scary-looking door, like the entrance to some final boss's chamber in a video game. I'd teleported to the lowest level of the notorious dungeon using my spell, and now the Demon King and I were standing in front of the room where the vampire progenitor resided.

I didn't sense any monsters on this level. There hadn't been any here, other than the vampire, when Vanir, Wiz, and I had come here before. Meaning it was the perfect place for me to face the Demon King.

The man in question, having been teleported here along with me, jumped back as far as he could. "Where are we? I was sure you'd try to take me somewhere you'd have plenty of friends... Hrm. Judging by the moldy smell and the dense mana everywhere, we must be in some sort of dungeon."

"Bingo. The bottom level of the dungeon reputed to be the deepest in the world. You've got two ways out of here: walk all the way to the surface...or teleport."

"I think I'll be heading home to my castle, then," the Demon King grumbled. "What? Did you imagine that the Demon King wouldn't be able to use a spell as simple as Teleport? I won't be stuck in this putrid labyrinth one moment longer..."

Just as he was about to activate his spell, I said, "Of course I knew you could use Teleport. But is the Demon King really going to run away? Is the ultimate bad guy going to flee from a one-on-one confrontation with the hero?" I slowly shook my finger at him.

After a very long pause, the Demon King said, "I see. I don't know where you learned what you know, but you've clearly done your research on the Demon King. You're right: If I was to run away from a

direct challenge to single combat, I would immediately cease to be able to call myself the king of the demons. However, O man so weak that he was immediately killed by my minion! You lack anything resembling the strength needed to face me. Go do some training and then come back when you're serious. That boy with the magic sword might be a good baseline to aim for." Then he laughed at me, a sort of snort, and a sneer came over his face.

I simply said to him...

"I'm an Adventurer."

I tried my best to give him a smile provocative enough to match his sneer.

"An Adventurer...?"

"That's right. The very weakest class."

Maybe the mana was just that thick down here, or maybe there was some sort of fluorescent moss growing on the walls, but this deepest level of the deepest dungeon wasn't pitch-black but instead glowed with a constant, soft blue-white light.

"You're an Adventurer? Not an Advanced Class, not a front-rower, not even a wizard, but a piddling Adventurer? And you think *you*—"

"—can go toe to toe with the Demon King? You got it, buddy. C'mon. Even if a goddess's powers *have* weakened you a bit, you'd never run from a poor, weak Adventurer, would you, Your Majesty?"

The Demon King's face twisted. For a second, I thought I might wet myself at the sight, but I couldn't just let him go running home. It was time to make use of the one skill I'd really cultivated as a shut-in in Japan: pissing people off.

The king, though, took a deep breath like he was calming himself down and said, "I won't rise to your bait. I haven't lived this long by being impetuous. You tell me you're an Adventurer, but so what? Let me guess. This is what you have in mind. You contribute nothing to your party's combat strength anyway, so you teleport me here and buy time by challenging me to a fight. Meanwhile, your party members pick off my minions, who will be left without the blessing of my powers."

Why the hell was he such a good guesser?

But he wasn't done yet. "Then, when you've bought your friends enough time, you'll escape somehow, presumably by teleporting again, and when I teleport back to my castle, your party will surround me. How's that? Sound about right?"

He began preparing to teleport back home.

I was a little impressed to see he hadn't wasted all those years of life, but this wasn't the time to be admiring him. Instead, I pulled out a card and showed it to him.

"Hey, slow down, man. This is my Adventurer's Card. I know it's kind of dark down here, and we're not exactly standing right next to each other, but you can at least make out the LEVEL, STATS, and CLASS fields, right? Seriously, check out these stats. I'm not one of those middling Adventurers, see? Oh, no. These are some *trash*-tier numbers. And you're seriously running away from me? You can dress it up however you like, but from where I'm standing, it feels like you're scared I might actually beat you. And you call yourself the Demon King? Look, man, I'm serving myself up on a silver platter here, and you're trying to *escape*?"

I saw a vein pulse on the Demon King's forehead. After a very, very long pause, he said, "Don't test me, boy. If the mood took me, you would become little more than a stain beneath my heel."

"A stain beneath my heel!" I parroted. "That's the kind of phrase I'd expect from a third-rate *mini*-boss. Seriously, what a letdown! Demon King, my ass! It turns out you're just a scared old man who's running away from the weakest-possible opponent with his tail between his legs!"

The echo of the Demon King's teeth grinding bounced off the walls of the dungeon. "It's no use," he said. "If you're just a sacrificial pawn of the weakest class, all the more reason not to waste any time with you. You're all talk, boy. Now, farewell!" he spat and then began to intone the Teleport spell...!

"You missing any generals lately? I probably had something to do with it. Beldia, Vanir, Hans, Sylvia, Wolbach, Serena. I think that was the order I went in. And then there was that strong guy defending your castle—didn't catch his name. If you want to keep calling yourself the Demon King, surely you'd better at least get revenge for your cronies?"

The Demon King stopped chanting, looked at me, and snorted. "That's the worst joke I've ever heard. Know this, fool: You were not even able to buy time for your friends! *Cursed Lightning!*" he cried, abruptly unleashing a spell in my direction.

Oh, shit! I was gonna—

"?!"

"?! ...*Ahem!* Heh, that was a close one... A sneak attack from the one and only Demon King... Who would have guessed? Lucky for me, when you're as good as I am, you can read an old man like an open book. You can see exactly what attack he's about to use. Pfft-heh-heh-

heh!”

That time I actually *did* wet myself a little. If my Auto-evade hadn’t activated by sheer luck, I would definitely have been missing my head right about now. Instead, the Demon King’s black lightning bolt had passed through the thin air my head had occupied an instant before.

I backed up a little, instinctively, out of sheer terror. The Demon King, though, didn’t even change positions after casting his spell; he just cocked his head. “...? Oh, so you used a skill to dodge me just now? One can’t normally ‘see’ lightning magic coming. Ugh, you’re turning out to be something of a nuisance...” He sighed, then started striding forward, cornering me.

Shoot! Hold on! I need to prepare myself...! “Wait—!”

“Hmph. What other little games do you have in mind? Not that any of them will help you. Old I may be, but killing a single Adventurer could never so much as...wind...me...?”

“.....?”

He’d closed the distance in an instant and grabbed me by the chest, but then he froze. I started to hear a crackling from the hand he was holding me with, as if it were burning, and then it started to smoke.

“Hrrrrraaaaaaaaagggggghhhhhh!”

He let go of me in a hurry, plunging his hand into his robe and writhing. I took the opportunity to put some space between us, but I also noticed I was missing something. Something very important that normally hung around my neck.

“What is this?” the Demon King demanded. “Some protective charm? Do you have a ward against curses?! Grrr... You play the lowest tricks...!”

There it was. He’d pulled it off my neck and thrown it disgustedly on the ground.

It was the Crimson Magic Clan charm Megumin had given me long ago.

It was just a simple amulet containing a hair from each of my friends, and yet...

“Hey, that’s a cherished possession! Don’t go throwing it on the ground!”

The Demon King huffed. “What the hell is it? My hand nearly got

burned black! What in the world is in that thing?! Is that...a blue hair?" he asked, gazing down uneasily at the charm.

"That little thing is packed with goddess hairs," I informed him.

"A f-f-fine thing to make me put my hand to! Hrk! That's right—I don't have time to be meddling around with you. I see I was wrong to take you for a mere small fry, but I don't care! I have to get back before my minions are—!"

Geez, all that and the old bastard still didn't want to stay and fight me? Well, I had a skill that I hoped would actually work on him in his weakened state.

Please, Lady Eris, grant me the fortune to take something good!

"Steal!"

"?!"

Ah, Steal. It was the very first skill I'd learned, and it had served me well all throughout my time here. I looked to see what I'd gotten, and...

"Aw, fail."

"....."

I was holding an embroidered handkerchief of what seemed to be handmade cloth. I tossed it aside, and the Demon King scrambled to grab it.

"Prized possession?" I asked.

"My daughter handmade it for me, and...er, *ahem*. It's nothing."

Feeling a pang of conscience to have inadvertently stolen something so personal, I pulled out my sword and brandished it at him. So much for Operation: Draw Him Into a Fight by Stealing His Most Prized Possession. It was time for a new strategy!

"First you launched a surprise attack on me, trying to get rid of me easily, and when you saw I was tougher to beat than you expected, you tried to run away. Are you *really* the Demon King? Man, I got this magic sword ready just to help me slay a *real* Demon King, and I have to waste it on *you*? This suuucks!"

The king glanced at the weapon I was holding. "I see it actually is enchanted. I grant it's quite an impressive piece, but I don't think it's suited to attacking, exactly."

"What do you mean? This thing's a magical masterpiece. My villain of a friend found it when he was looting the body of a dead adventurer. No one knows who made it, but it's got a real history. It should be more than enough to take care of some chicken-livered old — Yikes!"

Maybe all my needling had finally gotten to the king, or maybe he was still miffed about how I'd treated his daughter's gift, because he shouted: "Very well! If you're so eager to die, then let me send you to the next world with all haste!"

“Stop right there! After all those insults, now *you* run away? You coward! What was it you called me earlier? Chicken-livered? Now who’s the chicken?!”

I could hear the Demon King shouting from a distance, but he could say whatever he wanted. Using Ambush to hide among the dungeon’s gloomy shadows, I nocked an arrow in my bow...

“That was a dirty trick, blinding me with paltry magic like that! What happened to having a proper fight? Show yourself, boy!”

I saw him off in the distance, searching high and low for me...

Deadeye!

“Hrgh?!”

My arrow hit the Demon King square in the temple, causing it to whip to one side.

When he had attacked me, I’d used Create Earth to blind him and put some distance between us, but I guess I’d also pissed him off. First he’d lost his temper; then he caught an arrow in the temple, so you’d think that would have done the trick. But instead, he pressed a hand to his arrowed skull and ground his teeth, wobbling slightly. “S-so that’s where you are...! I suppose you won’t be satisfied until you’ve had your miserable fun with me...”

Gah! That arrow had barely scratched him! Was this one of those things where only magical weapons could hurt him?

I worked my way deeper into the maze-like dungeon, desperately trying to keep him from getting too close. If he got a hand on me again, there was a good chance I was done for. I seriously doubted I could bring down the Demon King with Drain Touch, and I wasn’t about to get close enough to find out. Hell, even if my arrow had hurt him a tiny bit, I would run out of ammo long before I did any serious damage to him.

“Don’t you feel pathetic? After all that big talk! At least the boy with the magic sword fought me face-to-face! And that Crusader! What are they to you?”

My Sense Foe skill alerted me that he was definitely getting closer. His aura felt big enough to crush a bug like me. I reached into my item pouch, pulled out a paper cylinder, and retrieved some lantern oil. As I backed away, I scattered the fuel on the floor like a fuse. And then I said two words: “*Set Trap.*”

“There you are!” the Demon King, catching my murmur, shouted. The hallway we were in branched out in several directions, but now he was coming straight for me.

I’d learned the Set Trap skill from a friendly Army Ranger. It increased the potency and effectiveness of traps set even by total amateurs—perfect for an underhanded schemer like me. As the Demon King rushed toward me, I stood up, no longer making any effort to hide.

“Draw your sword, boy! I’ll finish this in the blink of an eye!”

As discreetly as possible, I struck my lighter, then dropped it on the oil. As soon as I saw it catch flame, I took a big leap back.

“*Exploosion!!*”

“?!”

No sooner had I spoken than the dungeon resounded with a blast that shook the stone off the walls and floors and sent rock shards flying through the air. My homemade Tynymite at work!

“...! What? What the hell?” the Demon King sputtered. Everything below his left knee was a mess. Shit, it had done even less damage than I’d anticipated. This wasn’t actually a magic spell, though. Was that why it hadn’t really hurt him? I’d thought it would at least tear off a leg.

I backed away from the Demon King, who’d dropped to one knee from the injuries. To cover for how shaken I was, I started running my mouth again. “Heh! Did you think I was just an ordinary Adventurer? I told you, I’ve been involved in the demise of a bunch of your generals. *Naturally* I can use a simple spell like Explosion.”

“Liar! That was nowhere near the power of Explosion! That blast didn’t even seem to be magical in nature! What did you use, an exploding potion? You really will sink to anyth— Hey! Get back here!”

Without waiting for the Demon King to finish, I set off running through the dungeon halls. The king came after me, dragging his leg as he went. Aqua might have weakened him, but he obviously still had way more physical stamina than I did. Even with the injury to his leg, I couldn’t put any more distance between us. Who’d designed the bottom floor of this dungeon anyway? If I just kept running around willy-nilly like this, I was going to hit a dead end eventually, and then I was really screwed.

I dug through my item pouch until I found my last stick of Tynymite. Dammit, if only it hadn’t made Megumin so mad, I could have made a few more of these... But it had been hard enough to find a couple of minutes when she wasn’t looking to craft even these few

sticks.

If I could give the Demon King one more good hit with the Tynymite, maybe it would weaken him enough for me to go in with my magic sword and finish the job...

But then I felt it.

A hair-raising presence behind me. I knew what it was, and it wasn't good. The aura wasn't as strong as when Megumin used her Explosion, but the Demon King was trying to invoke some sort of magic, something powerful.

I turned to see him holding his hand up in my direction. Was this something I might be able to survive if my Auto-evade activated? No, no, I couldn't just trust to luck like that. If it *didn't* activate, I was probably going to die, right?

I was about ten meters away from the Demon King. This was definitely bad. The incantation was way longer than the one for his lightning spell earlier!

"I'm tired of playing around with you. I'm getting too old for this sort of thing, you see? I thought I would save my magic for when I got back home, but, well... Let's just say you won't be able to dodge this."

Shit! Crap! Sonofa—! Whatever was coming, it was going to be big.

Quick! Did I know any defensive magic? I reached into my pack and grabbed Megumin's gift, the extremely high-quality manatite.

"Try this on for size! *Inferno!*"

"Create Earth!!"

I drew every bit of MP out of the manatite and channeled it into creating a gigantic wall of earth right in front of me!

"Hrrngh! Arrrgh, that's hot!" I heard the Demon King cry from the other side of the barrier. It saved me from the flames, and it must have reflected them back at him. It really was a great wall, no shortage of soil. Just what you'd expect from high-quality manatite.

Wait... Hang on.

Maybe with one of these things...!

"Just how churlish do you intend to be, boy?! First you play your silly little tricks, and now you want to block my way with dirt? Are you planning to entomb yourself? I'm done playing hide-and-seek. This time, I—"

I took out another piece of manatite.

“Create Earth Golem!!”

“This time...I’m...going back to my castle...for...”

The earth started to squirm and form itself into a humanoid shape. With my usual level of magic, I could only create puny golems, but with this crystal on my side...

“You... You can even do *that*?”

By using all the MP from the manatite, I created a massive golem. Taller than the Demon King, big enough to fill the passageway.

I peeked out from behind the golem’s foot and gave my best smirk. *You haven’t seen hide-and-seek yet*, I thought.

“Round two!” I cried.

“You little—!”

3

“Coward! The Demon King would turn his back on me and flee?! Stand and fight! Have you already forgotten what *you* said to *me* a few minutes ago?!”

“You bastard! You dirty, rotten—!”

We raced through the dungeon. He was suddenly “it.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Some Demon King! Your generals were *way* stronger than you!”

“Silence! Cut a guy some slack! I’m not a young man anymore! I’m supposed to hang back and strengthen my followers, not fight on the front lines! And you *know* my powers are weakened right now!”

Maybe even the Demon King wasn’t equipped to fight a gigantic golem, or maybe he was afraid of leaving himself open to my attacks while he did it, but whatever the reason, he turned tail and fled, dragging one leg as he went.

You might think I had the advantage here, but I’d minimized the golem’s period of activity in order to make it as big and as strong as possible. It wouldn’t live long enough to help me if this fight went on for very long. I had to settle this before that happened...

“Take this! *Deadeye! Deadeye! Deadeye!*”

“Ouch! Argh! Hrgh! Wh-why, you...!”

The golem chased after the Demon King, while I took potshots at him with my bow and arrow from between the golem’s legs. All they did was scratch him, but it was enough to make him lose his cool. Combined with my taunting earlier, the Demon King really wasn’t thinking straight. If he’d simply teleported my golem somewhere else, it would have been all over for me.

Uh-oh. I was all out of arrows. My ideal scenario would be to use

the golem to smack the Demon King around a bit, then finish him off with my last stick of Tynymite and my magic sword when he was weak enough, but...

“Hff... Hff... I’ve had enough of this.”

Suddenly, the Demon King stopped running. “Did you *really* defeat my generals? Yes... I suppose you must have... After all, you have me dancing in the palm of your hand, even if you did have to use underhanded methods to make it happen.”

What, so we were monologuing now? Was he trying to buy time until my golem expired? I planned to use the creature to give him something to think about for as long as I had control of it.

“How did they do?” he asked. “Did they perform as well as a Demon King’s generals should? Surely they at least gave you a bit of pain.”

“Let’s see... Beldia, I grabbed his head with Steal, and then he was purified out of existence while he was busy stumbling around. By the way, that old castle he lived in ended up saddling me with a lot of debt—thanks.”

The Demon King took a deep breath, his golden eyes glittering like a bird of prey.

“We blew away Vanir with Explosion, but for some reason he’s still around to work in Wiz’s shop. He’s doing fine, in case you were wondering. And he’s swindled me out of more money than I care to think about...”

My golem reached toward the Demon King.

“Hans almost ate me up, and so did Sylvia—um, in two totally different ways. Oh, then there was Wolbach. She struck me as the one half-decent general you had. The last one, Serena, she made me a Regina follower and then killed me. So you could say your generals put me through a lot.”

“.....I see it’s not easy being you, either...” The Demon King sighed. I guess the old guy had had his hands full with that lot, himself.

“*Create Earth!*”

Suddenly, a massive amount of earth appeared in front of the Demon King—as much as I’d gotten using an entire manatite crystal all at once. The pile blocked my golem’s hand before it could reach him.

“Wait... Don’t tell me...”

“*Create Earth Golem!*” the king shouted, and now *his* pile of dirt started to writhe and assume humanoid form. Granted, his golem was a good bit smaller than mine.

I know I'm not one to talk, but can the Demon King do anything?!

"Hrm. This is no good. I've used a substantial amount of my MP. I have to hand it to you, boy. I've defeated swordsmen with swords and wizards with magic, turning each adventurer's specialty against them. But I've never met anyone who fought with methods as strange as yours."

He sounded genuinely impressed, but I had other things on my mind. I had the bigger golem, but this definitely showed the kind of power he had!

"I believe it's my turn now. You do come up with the most interesting ideas, though. I wonder what you'll think of next?"

His golem, boosted by the Demon King's ability to strengthen his followers, smashed my golem into dust.

"Welcome to round three, boy!"

"Goddammit!"

4

"Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That's right, run! Don't you want to try conjuring up another golem? Who knows—you might win this time!" Somewhere behind me was the Demon King, his gleeful voice bouncing off the dungeon walls.

So he could create golems, too? No fair!

I had three more manatite crystals in my item pouch, along with a single stick of Tinymite. My only other weapons were an enchanted blade and my beloved but weirdly named katana.

"You know perfectly well that if I made another golem, you'd just pulverize it again! You're a bad, bad person! No wonder those generals liked you so much!" I shouted back as I ran through the gloom of the dungeon.

"What?! N-now, hold on! They were a pain in *my* neck, too, I'll have you know. Beldia was always forgetting his head in the bath, Vanir wouldn't stop playing nasty tricks on my soldiers to get those bad vibes he loves so much, Wiz would simply walk off with the castle's war chest or some priceless heirloom and then sell it off, claiming she was practicing for when she opened her own shop..." He was talking faster and faster, as if he wanted to be sure he got it all out. "As for Hans, if you want to eat something from the stockpile, say so already! Don't go in there and pollute it with your poison body! Sylvia needs to stop trying to 'merge' with me at every available opportunity! Even Serena never stopped trying to solicit donations around the castle. I guess Wolbach *was* the only sensible follower I had...! I beg you, don't imagine I'm the wellspring from which *they* flow!"

Boy, he really had had it rough. I was almost starting to sympathize with him—but still I pulled out the stick of Tinymite I'd stashed while I was running.

As a member of demonkind, the Demon King was only significantly affected by magical attacks. But the same didn't go for Earth Golems...!

I turned back and pitched my Tinymite at the golem. In the same motion, I raised my hand...! "*Kindleeee!!*"

"?!"

I blasted the explosive I'd thrown at the golem with a fire magic spell. There was a loud *boom*, and then its torso vanished in a cloud of dust, leaving just the legs still plodding along. A bit of debris even fell from the dungeon ceiling, and I briefly worried that it might cave in. Had the blast been that big?

"Wh-why, you..." A piece of the demolished golem smacked the Demon King right in the face.

I grinned as triumphantly as I could manage and said, "That wasn't Explosion I just used. That was *Kindle*."

"I *know* that! Because that's what you shouted when you used it! No Adventurer could possibly use magic as advanced as Explosion anyway!" Now he was really mad. He resumed chasing me.

Geez, he was supposed to be the Demon King. Didn't he know that was the oldest trick in the Demon King handbook?!

Three more pieces of manatite. What should I do with them? Should I face him right here and now?!

While I hesitated, the Demon King reached out his hand.

I grabbed one of the manatite crystals. "*Lightning!*"

"*Cursed Lightning!*"

I sent a lightning bolt with the full force of an entire manatite crystal streaking toward the Demon King. But he sent dark lightning back and hit me in the right shoulder.

"Hrrrrn!" the Demon King hissed. "Grrrrr, you do know how to handle yourself! I'll give you that much, boy!"

"Ow, ow, owwww! My shoulder! There's a hole in my shoulder!" I pressed a hand to my shoulder and looked at the Demon King, my eyes brimming with tears. He was holding his right thigh and crouched on the ground. But his injury didn't look that bad, whereas I had a freaking *hole* in my *shoulder*.

This was bad. No way was I going to survive a fair fight. Only one thing to do...!

"Another game of hide-and-seek? I tire of this, boy! *Cursed Lightning!*" Still leaning his right knee on the ground, the Demon King stretched out his hand and unleashed his deadly magic.

Ugh, this was no good. How could he use such powerful spells

back-to-back without even chanting? I dropped the hand I'd been pressing to my shoulder, almost unconsciously pulling out my magic sword and holding it more or less in front of me.

Where it took the full brunt of the Demon King's magic and, with a dull sound, shattered into a zillion pieces.

"Ahhh!"

"?! So... Escaped again, have you? You have the luck of a demon..."

Brought to the brink of despair by the destruction of the weapon I'd been counting on, I grabbed the now-empty scabbard and threw it at the Demon King, crying, "Luck, my ass! If I'm so lucky, why the hell would any of this be happening to me?! Arrrrgh! Damn Dust for giving me a POS magic sword to lug around!"

"Y-you really should show a little more appreciation for someone's gift... But look, you didn't really think you could stop a spell like that with a run-of-the-mill magic sword, did you?" The Demon King seemed genuinely puzzled. I ignored him and drew the katana from across my back. The Demon King said, "Now, at least, I've sundered your last hope. How many manatite crystals do you have left? And how many of those lightning bolts can you conjure? I take it you can't use advanced magic. If you could, you'd have hit me with a *serious* spell by now, not some intermediate magic like Lightning. What do you have there? What do you mean to do with that lifeless hunk of steel? It's not even enchanted."

"It's Chunchunmaru."

.....

The Demon King came to a halt in spite of himself. "It's *what*?"

"I said: It's Chunchunmaru. The name of this sword is Chunchunmaru. Not 'hunk of steel.' Chunchunmaru. And after I use it to beat you, I think maybe I'll donate it to a museum or someth—"

"*Cursed Lightning!*"

"Yikes!" My Auto-evade caused me to dodge out of the way of the Demon King's attack.

"You miscreant! You knave! Never in my life have I been so mocked!"

My plan now was to piss off the Demon King until he ran himself out of MP. This might have been the first time my weirdly named sword had ever actually helped me. I put the sword on the ground—it wasn't going to do any damage to the Demon King anyway—and placed my hand against my shoulder instead, intoning, "*Heal!*"

"You can even use healing magic?" the king said in exasperation.

"*Heal! Heal!*" I cried, almost weeping from the pain in my

shoulder. The wound was too deep, though, and I couldn't do anything about it with my magic. Instead, I pressed my hand to my shoulder again and turned my back on the Demon King once more.

"You truly do nothing but flee, don't you? It's time for you to learn when to give up. You've done well for an Adventurer. I mean it. As a show of respect for you, I might even see fit to let you go. You've still got some manatite, don't you? I'll give you just long enough to perform the Teleport incantation."

I ignored the Demon King's very attractive offer, turning the corner of the hallway, where I crouched down, sliding to the floor with one hand still against my shoulder.

This is really, really bad. It won't stop bleeding.

Maybe it was time to teleport my way home... What should I do now? Had I bought enough time for the others to defeat the Demon King's bodyguards back at the castle? Anyway, heck, I'd lasted this long one-on-one. Together, the others would have no problem with him.

As for me, I had to stop this bleeding, and soon...

"Say, boy. I haven't yet learned your name. In a final battle such as this, I feel obliged, as the Demon King, to know the name of my opponent. Won't you tell me?"

Shhf. Shhf. I could tell he was coming my way by the sound of his leg dragging along the floor. I took out another chunk of manatite. "*Heal!*" With the wound on my shoulder finally closed, I shot a question back at the Demon King. "My name's Kazuma Satou. What's yours?"

I felt lethargic. Maybe I had lost too much blood. I knew I had to get up, but I couldn't summon the strength.

I heard the Demon King whisper: "It's Yasaka." And then I...

.....?

"Yasaka? Yasaka the Demon King? I kind of thought your name would be, y'know, scarier."

At that, the dragging sound went quiet. I guess the king must have stopped moving. After a long moment, I heard him chuckle softly. He was around the corner, so I couldn't see his face, but he sounded truly, deeply amused.

"My name is Kyoichi Yasaka. Kyoichi Yasaka, the Demon King."

.....*What?*

"I'm sorry, um, could you explain that to me? I mean... What? What?! You're Japanese? You're *human*?"

I was starting to lose it, but the Demon King sounded like he was really enjoying himself. “I shouldn’t think so. No, I’m very much a member of the demon tribe, and I have no connection to any place called Japan. Although I’ve heard rumors of a land by that name. And what about you? Do you not share your name with the great hero?”

...?!

“Hey, quit trying to confuse me! What, you think it’ll stop me from finishing you off? That’s dirty.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure *I’m* the one who’s about to be finished off. Heh-heh! That name does garner interesting responses from a great many of you, though.” He paused. “Do you wish to know where my name comes from? And wouldn’t you like to find out why my troops and I are attacking humanity? It is our greatest secret, one your people have never managed to figure out.” He laughed again, as if from the bottom of his heart.

Wait. What was going on here? Why did this seem just like the prelude to a final battle in some game or manga?

“I never mentioned an interest in knowing. Why would you tell me any of it?”

“Because every one of your strangely named confederates who has come before you has been eager to know. You humans tell and retell the story of a great hero who became the Demon King. But wouldn’t you like to know the truth? The reality no one else is privy to?”

“Um, okay. Maybe you could, uh, tell me, then? I mean, about your name and, like, why you’re attacking humanity and stuff?”

“If you wish to know the truth, then defeat me in battle!”

Damn dirty sonofa—!

“Mwa-ha-ha! Did I get under your skin? I’m sure you must be infuriated now! I got the last laugh! That brings the bile down a little.”

He might’ve been old, but he sure wasn’t mature!

“Ahhh, it’s been a long time since I last properly proclaimed myself like that. In the past, I’ve only ever spoken my name to those who were about to die. But you, I shall permit to leave with the knowledge. A gift, to the only person ever to push me so far in battle.”

And then the *shhf, shhf* started again, coming ever closer.

If I didn’t teleport out of there, he was going to finish me off. I had one piece of manatite left. And I definitely didn’t have enough MP personally to even use Teleport. If I was going to get home, I would have to burn this crystal.

“Hey,” I called to the Demon King, “are you planning to head right back from here? Just remember, if you go back to the castle, my

friends will probably be waiting for you. I'm sure it's been long enough for them to deal with your bodyguards."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," he replied. "Against the likes of them, my minions are probably all dead by now... So after I've either killed you or sent you running home, maybe I'll just relax here for a while. Then I'll find a few good, powerful monsters down in this dungeon to serve as my new bodyguards, and by the time I've had a break and returned to the castle, my daughter should be getting back with the rest of my forces in triumph."

Shoot, I hadn't thought about the possibility that his daughter would return at this worst of all possible moments. Maybe I should run back home, get my things ready, and then teleport back here with some adventurers from Axel.

No, that would never work. I didn't have the MP to come back here, and I was down to my last piece of manatite. Sure, I could get some MP from one of the other adventurers with Drain Touch, but when the town was right in the middle of a battle for its very existence, could I expect anyone to come with me if I showed up begging them to defeat the Demon King with me?

Shhf. Shhf.

I could hear the king dragging himself closer again.

So what would happen if I went home without beating him? When my three troublesome teammates saw the Demon King show up with a fresh batch of monsters and without me, would they do what I'd told them and run home?

I could say with complete confidence: They would not do what I had told them.

Maybe I could ask the king to take them a message for me. You know, tell them that it had ended in a draw and I'd gone back home. But I guess it would be asking a lot to expect them to believe him.

And that left...

"Say, um, if I asked you to take me back to the castle with you, could I count on you to teleport us?"

"I hardly think I'm obliged to stick my neck out quite that far. But I do see a great deal of potential in you. How about you become one of my generals? That would involve me taking the liberty of putting a curse on you to ensure you couldn't betray me, but if you'll submit to that, I would take you back with me."

It figured.

No, wait! I could let him put the curse on me, then just have Aqua break it, right?

No, wait... If the curse made me unable to betray him, I'd

probably end up telling him all about Aqua's powers or something.

Shhf. Shhf.

I sat there, listening to that sound get closer. And then I pulled out one particular item. My Adventurer's Card, dirty and worn with long use. In my other hand, I held my last piece of manatite.

Shhf. Shhf.

Hrm... To be honest, I didn't like this. This wasn't what I was built for. Let the guys who were dying to be heroes handle this stuff. You know, someone who wanted to go down in history. Or even one of those overpowered hero types.

I was just a NEET who wanted to lay around drinking, then sleep till noon the next day; be waited on hand and foot by beautiful ladies; and generally lead a totally dissolute life. This wasn't my bag.

"Done chanting Teleport?" the Demon King said, and I could hear his dragging leg getting closer. "I said I would let you go, but there's no guarantee I'll be able to hold off until the instant I actually see your miserable face."

They're all gonna be upset with me...

But if I didn't do this, they were going to fly off the handle and do something stupid...again. With that thought in mind, I brought a finger to my card. The *shhf, shhf* was practically right next to me.

"Hey, don't turn that corner, okay? I want you to just listen to me for a second. Promise me you won't get angry. We know we've got a draw on our hands here, right? What I want you to do is *send* me back to your castle first."

I heard the leg-dragging stop abruptly.

"Just send me back, and I'll gather up my friends and go home. You can take a rest or a breather or whatever you want. Or just come straight back to the castle. I promise we won't lay a hand on you."

For a moment, the dungeon grew very, very quiet. Then I heard: "Heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha! A draw? What are you talking about? I think you're under some kind of misapprehension. You've lost. Letting you escape is merely a whim on my part!"

With that, the Demon King came around the corner...and stopped cold.

Because he saw the glow of an Explosion spell hovering between my palms.

“.....A draw. Yes, I see. Very good, Adventurer. I shall send you back to my castle first. Will that satisfy you?”

“Fraid not. I told you not to turn that corner. ‘Just listen,’ I said, and ‘promise me you won’t get angry.’ Now that you’ve seen *this*, I can’t trust what you say anymore. What if you teleport me into a pit of lava? Then I’d die, and I wouldn’t even get anything out of it, right?”

The Demon King swallowed heavily, never taking his eyes off the glow in my hands. “Yes, you’re right. What should I do, then? You know that if you unleash that spell from such close range, you’re as good as dead. Even if you were at a safe distance, you’d bring this dungeon down on your own head. That’s why you didn’t use that spell before, isn’t it?!”

Well, more or less.

“Tell me, how is it that an Adventurer who can’t even use advanced magic can wield a far, far more powerful and complex spell like Explosion? What *are* you?”

“Good question. Gosh, even I’m not too sure sometimes. Like, am I...their guardian? Lover? Keeper? Master? Friend? Party member? Cohabitant? Man, none of those labels quite fits.”

I was really fretting, but the Demon King just kept looking at that light, sweating bullets.

“See, I know a girl who *loves* this spell. She uses it at least once a day, and I’m always there with her. Day after day after day after day, hearing the incantation and seeing the gestures, until even I picked them up.”

The light between my palms was getting so bright and hot, you’d think it would burn me. If I let my concentration slip for a moment, it would explode. I was pretty impressed to realize Megumin controlled something with this sort of power every single day.

“At point-blank range, a pathetic weakling like you would be incinerated without a trace. But *I* am the Demon King. Some Adventurer’s Explosion simply cannot defeat me in a single blast, you understand?”

“You sure about that, now that Aqua’s weakened you? It’d at least bring this dungeon down on your head—isn’t that what you said? You might survive the spell, but how about being buried alive?”

The Demon King went quiet again. I must have lost a lot of blood because I was feeling light-headed.

I need to get this over with.

“Do you not fear death?” the Demon King asked.

“Of course, I do,” I said. “I’m shaking in my boots. I’ve died a bunch of times already, and that only makes it worse.”

Yes, dying was scary. Frankly, I felt like I might burst into tears at

any moment. The thought that I might not see any of the others ever again just about broke my heart. But...

“If you simply allow me to die, I’ll take my enigmas with me to my grave, depriving humanity of the knowledge. Don’t you want to hear how I got my name? And why my army—”

“Nope. Don’t care.”

But...

Those girls probably figured I’d manage something.

“.....*Cursed*—”

The Demon King started to intone another spell, but I didn’t let him finish.

“*Exploooooosion!!*”

I unleashed mine instead!

5

My body felt light and floaty. It wasn’t very reassuring.

Come to think of it, I couldn’t see or hear anything. But I did feel like there was a voice calling me from a great distance.

I sort of, kind of turned toward it. Just by wishing to approach the voice, I found myself drifting toward it. It felt like floating, but, like, the way you would in a dream.

Whatever it was, it was a weird sensation.

As I headed in the direction I felt like I was being called from, I finally saw a bright light.

“Welcome to the Great Beyond. I am Aqua, the goddess who shall guide you onto your new path. Kazuma Satou, you died on the lowest level of a dungeon. It can’t be easy for you to hear this, but your life is over.”



.....

I was back in a room I was already thoroughly familiar with. I thought I'd drifted into the light, but for some reason, Aqua was there. And so was Eris, right beside her.

If Aqua was here... Did that mean I'd successfully defeated the Demon King? I was really curious to know what had happened after our battle. Had she been sent back here the moment I beat the bad guy?

"Hey, Aqua, what happened after I teleported away with the Demon King?" I asked, but she didn't look up, didn't make eye contact. For that matter, her bangs hid her face and made it impossible to see her expression.

"You have...several choices."

She sounded like she was reading from a script.

"You can be reborn as an infant in this world."

"Hey, Aqua, before I make any choices, you've got to tell me what's going on here. What happened to everyone? Hey! Look at a guy when he's talking to you!"

Aqua continued to ignore my attempts to interrogate her, going on robotically:

"...Or you may be reborn as an infant in the peaceful land of Japan."

"Listen to me, for crying out loud! I'm asking you what happened after I left! If you keep ignoring me, I'll jam my fingers in your nose and make you look at me!"

At last, Aqua raised her head. Her voice was shaking.

"Or...you can live peacefully in Heaven, where you won't have to deal with any un-un-m-manageable party members, or go deep into debt, or be arrested, or...or have anything else awful happen to you...!"

Now her shoulders were shaking, too, and big, fat tears started to roll down her cheeks.

...Wow, she's seriously ugly crying.

Eris placed a hand gently on Aqua's heaving shoulder. Aqua buried her face in Eris's chest and sniffled loudly.

Seeing Aqua like that, I found myself feeling oddly philosophical. The way she was reacting, I guess it meant I couldn't come back to life anymore. I mean, I'd been ready for that. Couldn't really complain now.

In fact, I'd thought it would make me more upset, but I found myself surprisingly calm. Was it because I'd done what I set out to do and then arrived at this point after accomplishing my goal?

My goal... My goal was to get her home, back here.

I looked down and realized the lower half of my body was transparent.

Aqua continued to sob. Eris held her and patted her head, then said to me, "You've done well, Kazuma. The others were able to defeat the Demon King's bodyguards, and then they simply waited and prayed for your success. And the instant you defeated the Demon King, Aqua showed up here. That was how everyone knew you'd succeeded."

That brought me a rush of relief.

"Now, with the battle over, they're tending to their wounds... although with my senior goddess disappearing so suddenly, it's been somewhat chaotic..."

Oh yeah... This meant I wouldn't have the chance to tell everyone I'd died down in that dungeon. Shoot. What if Megumin and Darkness went on a journey to try to find me? For that matter, what if everyone I knew in Axel joined them? This could turn into a whole thing.



Uh... Everyone *would* want to look for me, right? It wasn't just, you know, wishful thinking on my part, was it?

Shoot! It really sucked to be torn away from everyone else without getting to say a word to them. Still, I was glad I was just a spirit here, without a proper body. Otherwise, I might have been crying as sloppily as Aqua.

I guess maybe my thoughts showed on my face, because Eris gave me a sweet smile.

“*Ahem.* Kazuma Satou. As you died in the process of defeating the Demon King...I've been instructed to offer you something else, above and beyond the usual postmortem options.”

Aqua looked up suddenly at that.

Eris held up a finger, smiling pleasantly. “First: You can choose to live a life of ease in Heaven, as already described to you.” She held up another finger. “Second: You can be given a physical body and return to Japan. In that case, you would be provided with an endless supply of money for the duration of your life, an ideal spouse, and— H-hey, Aqua! Y-you're very close...! Your face is very close to mine! Please don't get so excited!”

Aqua rubbed her tears away vigorously and listened intently to what Eris was saying. Eris, meanwhile, cleared her throat and continued.

“And the third option: You can be given a physical body and return once more to *this* world.”

Aqua's face absolutely lit up.

...Geez, what was she looking so happy for? What a jerk, acting like she already knew what I would pick.

Okay, so maybe it was a little soon to be going to Heaven still. But that thing about going back to Japan, that was tempting. Eris had said I would have enough money to spend the rest of my days living it up. And what was that about an ideal spouse? She seemed to mean that if I went to Japan, I could spend my entire life with no constraints, no work, no ridiculous problems, an adorable wife...

“So. What would you like to do?” Eris asked me with a little smile.

How could I even hesitate about that question now? How I had suffered in that other world! Outrageous creatures, half-baked

inhabitants. A bonkers place in which decent, sensible people weren't just rare, they were practically nonexistent.

If I went back there, I was pretty much guaranteed to continue suffering. It hardly took a moment's thought to know that. Without a second's hesitation, I replied:

"Send me back. Back to that awful, stupid world that I hate."

Eris grinned.

"Okay! Now that that's decided, we've got to get back to everyone posthaste! Eris, use that power of yours to do that thing and send us back to the Demon King's castle! I'm sure everyone is worried about me, what with how I disappeared so suddenly. We've got to get back right away!"

Eris, though, knit her brow. "Um, Aqua... I don't quite know how to tell you this, but now that you've come back safely to the heavenly realm...well, we need you to run things for Japan. I don't think you can afford to play around in this world anymore..."

Aqua grabbed Eris by the shoulders. She shook her head hard, her eyes filling with tears again.

"I'm s-sorry, Aqua, but I can't help you, even if you cry at me...! Oh! Stop that, please! Please stop trying to pull my pads out! Look, I'm sorry, but even that won't get you anywhere!"

I watched them struggle for a moment, then said, *"Hey, you two. Uh, I've got a question."* I scratched my cheek with a semitranslucent finger. *"I think I remember being told that if I beat the Demon King, I could have any one wish I wanted, right?"* (I was really directing the question at my precious, precious Eris.)

That stopped the two of them in mid-scuffle.

"Eris," Aqua whispered, "what do we do? I figured there was no way he'd ever defeat the Demon King, so I told him he could have one wish, just to give him a little push. I know his kind. He might ask to become a god or say, *I want the entire universe* or something..."

"G-gosh," Eris whispered back. "I don't know if even Kazuma would... But I *could* imagine him asking to spend the rest of his life surrounded by a harem consisting of every imaginable type of woman..."

Did they think I couldn't hear them? And anyway, what was going on here? Had it been a BS offer all along? You really couldn't trust these deities!

A harem with every imaginable type of woman *was* a tempting idea, but I already knew what I wanted.

"I want my cheat. The one I didn't get when I came to this world the first time."

Eris giggled at that. *"That wish, we can grant. You're right. The Demon King may be defeated, but there are still plenty of dangerous foes in this world. You'll need a boon of your own..."* She was grinning mischievously. I suspected she already knew what "cheat" I was going to ask for.

"Oh..." Aqua reached out toward me anxiously but then drew back. I guess after everything she'd put me through, even she couldn't bring herself to actually ask me to take her instead of some OP gimmick. Did that mean she realized how much trouble she'd caused? Maybe she'd matured more than I'd realized.

"What ability do you wish for, then? Or what powerful item? Perhaps incredible strength? Or inexhaustible intelligence?" Eris listed the options, sounding more and more excited. Beside her, Aqua was unusually quiet and downcast. It was funny; she normally didn't hesitate to demand exactly what she wanted. If she'd always acted this demure, my life would have been a lot easier.

To Eris, I said:

"Does a goddess count as a cheat?"

That made Eris smile from the bottom of her heart. And Aqua's face lit up brighter than I'd ever seen it before.

"Eris! Eris!! Hurry up and resurrect Kazuma! Come on! We'd better pick up the pace before everyone finishes their first aid and their rest and decides to go back home!"

"Yes, yes, I understand. But I'll need you to lend me your power, too. We're about to try to resurrect an annihilated physical body, after all... All right, Kazuma. This is the most exceptional of exceptions. It won't happen again. So please, cherish your life from now on..."

"Yeah, he gets it, he'll be careful, now come on! Eris, we have to hurry!"

"Yikes! Aqua! Argh... All right, here we go...!"

""Resurrection!!""

The two goddesses used their power in unison, and a tremendous heat filled my body. Suddenly I could feel the weight of my physical form. I put my physical feet on the ground and felt a pleasant chill.

At the same time, though, the two who'd brought me back to life looked away in a bit of a panic.

...?

"A-Aqua! This is all because you were in too much of a hurry to

bring him back! Quick, conjure up some clothes or something...!”

“Aw, don’t blame me! I was just eager! ...Oh no! Look, Kazuma’s excited!”

I was naked as the day I was born.

“J-just a second—we’ll give you some clothes...! Come on, Aqua! You hand them to him. You’ve seen him this way before, right? Lots of times...”

“Don’t make me do it! I feel like he’d jump me! Kazuma always used to be so cute, but somewhere along the line he grew up...”

“Shut up and give me something to wear already! How long am I supposed to stand here in my birthday suit?!”

6

When I’d finally gotten some clothes on, I turned once more to Eris. Aqua stood beside me, looking ecstatic.

“All right,” Eris said. “This time, my dear senior goddess, you can return to the heavenly realm anytime you wish. Though I don’t suppose you’ll be interested in doing that for a good long while.” She grinned.

Aqua, pleased as could be, and definitely no more capable of learning than she’d ever been, said, “Eh, I guess. It’s just, you know... What’s that old saying? All’s well that ends well! If I hadn’t said what I said, we probably never would have beaten the Demon King. Hold on... Does that mean Kazuma was technically guided by a goddess to defeat the Demon King? And I helped weaken him, too. I really acted like a true goddess this time. In fact, I think you could almost say I was the MVP of our quest to slay the Demon King!”

...Okay. Too excited.

“All right, listen, don’t get ahead of yourself. *I’m* the one who defeated the Demon King, remember? You understand that? Me, the hero, Kazuma. I’m going to go down in history. You’re just a useless runaway goddess who needed someone to come save you. I mean, what are you even talking about?”

“Hello? Are you forgetting that you’re just a good-for-nothing NEET who could never have defeated the Demon King without *my* powers? I think that merits a bigger share of the bounty for the king. Let’s see... I think about ninety percent would be appropriate! And now that I can come back to the heavenly realm, that means I have access to all my usual rights and prerogatives as a goddess. If you don’t treat me well, I really will show you divine punishment!” Aqua

brushed some hair away from her face, looking thoroughly confident despite the ridiculous things coming out of her mouth.

Eris was listening to our argument, looking as if the whole thing amused her.

Aqua, still flying high, chirped, "I wonder if Megumin and Darkness and the others got so worried that they started crying when I suddenly disappeared from right in front of them! We'd better hurry back and tell everyone it's all right!"

"Very well, Kazuma. If you would be so kind as to formally repeat your wish for me." Eris put her hands together, partly like she was thanking me for defeating the Demon King and partly like she was praying. But with that gorgeous smile on her face, I still felt like she would make a pretty good main heroine.

Whereas, in contrast...

"Say, Kazuma, when we get back to town, I think this calls for a nice, cold Crimson Beer! I'll thank you to cast your best Freeze spell on my mug. Ooh, I can't wait to see Emperor Zel again. I'll bet he's a magnificent dragon by now!"

I looked from Aqua...to Eris...and back again.

"...? What's wrong? Why the weird look? I mean, your face always looks weird, but it looks extra funny now. Want me to cast Heal on it?"

.....

I told Eris what I wished for...!

I felt dizzy for an instant, and then I was standing in a familiar place: the Demon King's chamber, where I'd been until not long before. As if to prove it, the Demon King's bodyguards lay on the ground all around me.

Everyone else in the room looked up, startled, when I suddenly materialized out of thin air. And then:

""Kazuma! Welcome...home...?""" Darkness and Megumin said in unison, trailing off even as the words came out of their mouths.

I took a good look at them all. Darkness was seriously wounded. It wasn't life-threatening, but it showed what a tough battle it had really been. Megumin and Yunyun both looked pretty shocked, but neither had any obvious injuries. Mitsurugi, though, was lying on the ground nearby, his two girlfriends practically clinging to him. I could see his chest moving up and down, so I assumed he was at least alive.

"Um...," Megumin said, slowly and hesitantly. "That person with you...who's she?"

She pointed at the goddess Eris, standing beside me.

I gestured at Eris, who was looking anxious and a little confused. “I think you all know her by name. This is the famous goddess Eris. She offered me a reward for defeating the Demon King, and I figured, well, I worked hard enough for it. So why not?”

““““What?!””” Megumin, Yunyun, and Darkness all exclaimed, backing away.

Darkness promptly fell down on one knee. “E-Eris, my lady! It’s true—you look exactly as you’re depicted in your churches... Exactly... Huh?” She lifted her head and took a good look at Eris’s face. The goddess averted her eyes.

And right then—

“How could you *do* that to me?!”

A pillar of light appeared, and Aqua came flying out of it.

“Gah! Shit, you can come down here on your own now?!”

“M-my senior goddess! What are you doing? You can’t come to a world outside your jurisdiction without permission! Don’t blame me if you aren’t able to get back to the heavenly realm again!”

Aqua, however, was crying noisily. “Waaaaaaah! Ga—Gazumaaaaa! Bwaaaaaaaah! Ahhhhhhh! Ahhhhhhhhhhh!”

“You just never stop causing trouble, do you?! I left you there because you let it all go to your head! Aw, for— I was gonna go get you after a while! How can you be such an idiot?!”

Megumin and Darkness looked genuinely relieved to see Aqua, waterworks and all. Then we heard two new voices:

“Hey! I don’t really get what’s going on here, but if we’ve got a Priest now, then Kyouya needs help!”

“That’s right! He’s really hurt!”

They were almost interrupted by Yunyun, who shouted: “Oh no! The Demon King’s army is teleporting back here one unit after another! Wait... Is that the king’s daughter over there?!” She was looking out from the balcony and appeared very worried.

Shit! Were they back already? Well, we’d done what we came to do. It was time to show ourselves out.

“C’m—quit crying and let’s get the hell out of here! Grrr... They’re already here, and there’s nothing we can do about it. We’ll figure out how to handle this later...”

“Waaaaaah! Bwaaaaaaah!”

“U-um, D-Darkness? Your face seems to be very...very close to mine...”

“Apologies, my lady. I was just thinking you bear a striking resemblance to a friend of mine...”

So Aqua was still weeping, Darkness was still obsessed with Eris, and somewhere in the middle of it all, Megumin started chanting a spell.

Huh? Wait—!

“Exploosion!”

Megumin, with the satchel full of manatite on her back, let off an explosion from the balcony.

“Megumin?!” Yunyun exclaimed when she noticed her friend beside her. “Wait, what are you doing?!”

“Explosion! Explosion!!”

“Stop! Megumin, stop it! You’ve got a nosebleed! Blood is coming from your nose!”

I came out on the balcony to stop Megumin from attacking the Demon King’s army, but from that vantage point, I could see the troops below had been thrown into disarray by the sudden series of magical explosions. I saw someone running away in tears as monsters covered her retreat. That must be the Demon King’s daughter.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! I am the Demon King Megumin! Conqueror of this castle and the world’s strongest Arch-wizard! Any fool who dares approach my castle shall be blown into oblivion by my unstoppable power!”

“Megumin, calm down! We didn’t defeat one Demon King just to have another one pop up!”

She was so right. I desperately didn’t want any more trouble coming my way.

Well, it looked like it was time.

“Yunyun, get Teleport ready. I’m out of MP.”

“Huh? Oh! I only have enough magic left to use it maybe twice... But here we’ve got...”

Teleport could transport up to four people at a time, but now that I’d brought Eris here, we had nine people.

“I see there’s no choice. Take this, Kazuma.” Megumin, enjoying a brief, but much-needed break from cowing the Demon King’s daughter and her forces with Explosion, wiped her nose furiously and handed me a chunk of manatite.

“Hey, uh, try not to overdo it, okay?” I said.

“Well, after getting such a rich gift from you, Kazuma, I feel I must repay you somehow. Although a certain someone doesn’t seem very bothered by any of this.”

“Wha—? Oh...! Who, me? Are you talking about me?!” Darkness

exclaimed.

What was she saying anyway? That the castle itself was repayment for the manatite? I felt like I was getting a lot more than I'd given. Wait... What was I supposed to do with a castle full of monsters anyway?

"Okay, uh, all right, everyone, gather over here, please. I'll use Teleport to get us out of here!" Yunyun said, and the others clustered around her.

"Hold on! Heal Kyouya first! I think his pulse is dropping!"

"He's hardly breathing...!"

"Lady Eris, I just can't shake the feeling that you and I have met somewhere before..."

"N-n-n-no, we definitely have not! Oh, but I don't know what I'm going to do now..."

With everyone chattering excitedly, Yunyun activated her first burst of Teleport.

"*Teleport!*"

Eris, Mitsurugi, and his two friends were swept away, leaving five people in the room.

"Ohhh... *Sniff... Sniff...*"

Yunyun put a hand on Aqua's shoulder; the goddess seemed intent on sniffing for as long as possible. Megumin lined up beside them, followed by Darkness, wiping some blood off her cheek.

"Here I go again," Yunyun said. "I'll see you in Axel, all right, Kazuma?" And then she shouted, "*Teleport!*" and disappeared.

For some reason, though, Aqua was still there, sniffing away.

"Huh? What's going on? Why didn't Teleport work on you?"

"B-because I didn't...*sniff...*w-want it to! *Hic!*" Aqua wiped her nose.

"Oh, for—! Even at the very end, you have to act like a brat, don't you?"

"N-no! That's not it! Hear me out!" Aqua said quickly, her eyes still full of tears. "There's something I want to say! Just maybe not...in front of the others..."

"I can't believe you! This isn't the time for that kind of talk! While we're standing here, the enemy is pouring in! Who knows when they'll show up?!" I shouted, but Aqua, tears still hovering at the corners of her eyes, didn't look like she was going to say anything.

Not far away, I heard someone (or maybe several people) bustling

around. They hadn't taken the trap that Aqua and I had used to get here but must have come up the stairs or whatever it was you were supposed to do. I was definitely on edge as I waited for Aqua to say whatever it was she was going to say. She wiped her tears and began, "Hey, Kazuma..."

"What? Get it out already! Look, I'm sorry for leaving you behind, but I really did plan to come get you eventually!"

Aqua, though, shook her head. "Um... Look, even I know... Well, I know I'm not the absolute smartest person in the whole world, right?"

"Uh-huh. I might say you're probably one of the dumbest. What's your point?"

Aqua gritted her teeth for a second at that, but then her expression softened again. "Well, since we both agree on that... I won't try to find the perfect words. I'll just put it as simply as I can."

"Seriously, what is it? How many ways can I tell you to hurry up?! Listen, you can hear footsteps outside!" And indeed, from the other side of the chamber door, we could hear a loud thudding coming closer. I was pretty much panicking already, but Aqua gave me her most beatific smile and said:

"Thank you."

...I never, in my whole entire life, thought a day would come when my heart would skip a beat because of her. But here we were.



Epilogue

I was in my usual room, doing my usual things. It was a pretty boring place to work, never different, never changing...and then a very familiar visitor arrived.

“Hey,” he said, giving me a little wave.

Hey, *indeed*...

“Kazuma,” I said, “I don’t know how you manage it...” I’d never known anyone who dropped dead so easily. I wished the man who had defeated the Demon King himself would stop showing up here so nonchalantly. For that matter, I wished he would stop treating it like a place to hang out. At the moment, he’d put his hands behind his back and kicked his feet out on the floor, relaxing contentedly.

This is supposed to be where the souls of this world’s deceased are summoned. Not a place to kick back and relax...

“Aw, man, this is the *best* place to kick back and relax. Just looking at you makes me feel healed, Lady Eris,” he said, resting his head on his arms.

“Hrm. Things weren’t easy after you pulled your little stunt,” I informed him. “Do you know how hard I worked just to get back here?”

“Aw, c’mon, Lady Eris. You weren’t even in town when I got back. I was hoping to give you a proper send-off.”

Send-off?

No, no, there were more important things to attend to.

“*Ahem*. Would you stop calling me Lady Eris already? You’re the hero who defeated the Demon King, and you know my true identity, so I don’t mind if you address me less formally. And feel free to speak casually, like you normally do.”

“Fine. Same to you, then. You can just talk casually to me, like you always do.”

“Er... When I’m in this form, I can’t seem to help myself speaking more formally... But anyway, you seem tired. What happened this time? What with the mortal plane being so peaceful these days, I don’t get to go down there too often anymore...”

What manner of monster could possibly have killed him this time? With the Demon King defeated, the monsters of this world had gotten weaker. There really shouldn’t have been anything left that could take

him out like this.

“Eh, things happen. But listen to this! They kicked me out of my mansion just 'cause I got a little full of myself! I'm the big hero who defeated the Demon King, right? I think I deserve a little more, y'know, credit.”

That was terrible. I didn't know what had happened, but I agreed that he deserved better than that.

“It sounds like everyone's in good spirits, at least. I trust there's no serious trouble?”

“Yeah, in fact, maybe everyone's spirits are a little *too* good. As for trouble, nothing much, I guess... But I do have this bad feeling that won't go away. Megumin and Yunyun keep teleporting off somewhere, and then Megumin comes back looking really refreshed. I just know she's letting off her explosions someplace, but the question is, where?”

I decided not to mention to him that the girls were teleporting to the Demon King's castle each day and using it for target practice.

“Darkness is famous now as the big noble who gave everything to kill the Demon King. She said they even gave her more territory or something. And now she's complaining that she's got loads of marriage proposals—not just from our country but from neighboring countries, too! She's been shut up in her mansion for ages lately, entertaining messengers from the government.”

To think, he himself was the reason she kept turning down those proposals, and he talked about it as if it had nothing to do with him... It must be tough for Darkness. She had some powerful rivals for him, including Megumin and my adopted younger sister, and all for such an uninhibited man.

“And then there's Aqua... She's the one who chased me out of the house, and now she won't let me back in. She keeps asking if I'm going to continue saying such stupid things, but I don't know what stupid things I said...”

“Well, whatever did you say to get yourself kicked out in the first place?”

If I wasn't mistaken, this was the second time he'd found himself chased out of his own mansion. Considering that he *had* saved the entire world, it was hard to believe that *anything* he might say could make Aqua so mad at him...

“Well, remember, I defeated the Demon King, and the entire town was fawning over me, and I admit I sort of let it go to my head. But I only said it as, you know, a little joke. Lightheartedly. ‘Cool! Daddy's gonna start himself a harem!’ I said.”

“.....”

“Lady Eris, I promise I've seen the error of my ways. Please don't go quiet on me. You're scaring me.”

I take back everything I said. This guy could really use a little more pain.

“Well, make yourself at home until my senior goddess calls you back, I suppose,” I said. I figured it wouldn’t be so bad to let him relax a little while he was here.

“Calls for me?” he asked, lifting his head as he lay on his back. “Oh, I’m not, like, dead, you know.”

“You’re not? But... You’re here, aren’t you?”

“Uh-huh. Got here by myself.”

...?

“I used Teleport! Remember how I came here just before the final battle with the Demon King? I still had one more slot. So...”

“?!”

Was he saying what I thought he was saying? “Wait a second—*here*? You registered *this* as one of your destinations?”

“Uh-huh. Believe me, even I wouldn’t have left Aqua here if I hadn’t had a plan for coming back to get her. So can I visit you sometimes? Like, anytime I get caught up in some kind of trouble...?”

“Absolutely not! What are you even saying?! Let’s go back to the part about you registering this place as a Teleport destination! How were you even able to do that?! I don’t understand! How is it you’re continually able to do things no one else even thinks of?!”

“H-hey, I was just curious. I wondered if I could register this place, and next thing I knew...”

Next thing he knew, he was dropping in here like it was no big deal?!

“By the way, Darkness keeps going around looking for Chris. Heck, if I could bump into you every once in a while, maybe I wouldn’t have to do stuff like this.”

“Urk... It seems a lot of people are looking for me. I’m sure I’ll come see you eventually...”

Then he lifted himself up tiredly. “What do they take the world-saving hero for anyway? All right, that tears it! I’m going to make them pay!” He cracked his neck and yawned.

The world-saving hero, I thought. He said it so lightheartedly, but did he really understand the magnitude of what he had done? Completely and totally powerless himself, he’d dragged along a party of troublesome comrades, defeating not only the Demon King’s generals but a whole host of other powerful opponents, finally toppling the Demon King himself. Even the heroes of fairy tales (which always included a fair amount of exaggeration) first obtained legendary equipment, then gathered powerful friends, and only after

that did the great deeds for which they became renowned.

“First up is the moron who chased me out. I act the tiniest bit soft toward her, and she gets on her high horse again...” He started doing some light stretches and began intoning the Teleport incantation. Just thinking of what was about to happen, I couldn’t resist a smile. He always seemed to be at the center of a lot of trouble and danger, but at least it was always a fun time.

“Kay. See ya, Lady Eris. I’m gonna go reduce a certain someone to tears.”

“Have a safe trip. And don’t be *too* hard on her, all right?”

The world-saving hero only grinned and turned away from me.

May this person receive at least a little more of a reward. May he not regret staying in this world instead of going back to Japan.

“Kazuma, do you think you could hold on a moment? Since you’ve come all this way, let me give you a little gift.”

He looked at me, curious. I reached out my hand and smiled. “For you who worked so hard on behalf of this world, may you have just a little bit of good fortune.”

May you fall more and more in love with this wonderful world you protected.

With my hand outstretched, I prayed with all my might.

“*Blessing!* God’s blessing upon you!”

The End.

Afterword

This is your author, Natsume Akatsuki, here. Thank you so much for picking up Volume 17 of *Konosuba*.

When in the world did we get to seventeen volumes? I can only bow my head in gratitude to those who have come all this way with me. I'd like to talk a bit about this book. If you're the type who likes to read the afterword first, be warned that there will be spoilers. You may want to read the book first and then come back.

Let's rewind to when Kazuma and the others were hanging around the Demon King's castle, trying to collect their runaway goddess.

That's right about when the detachment from the Demon King's army would be attacking Axel. All the adventurers who made not the slightest move to leave the starter town despite being of high level must have given the monsters a real run for their money. And the punk adventurer who's normally in the shadows; the strange plushie-like guy who is, when you get right down to it, a former noble and finally decided to act like it; the owner of the magical item shoppe; and the part-timer who made loads of money off the beautiful, big-chested receptionist must have gotten plenty punchy, too.

If we were to casually use identification magic on the other town residents, we might discover a chicken with an inordinately high level and a black cat whose JOB field reads DARK GODDESS.

Any soldiers of the Demon King who wandered into a certain shop might find themselves attacked by vegetables from the fields or assaulted by mysterious poltergeist phenomena.

Over in the capital, the picked troops led by the Demon King's daughter would be facing the national army, a bunch of cheat-wielding adventurers, and Crimson Magic Clan veterans.

Not to mention a certain suit of armor who'd followed the Crimson Magic Clan members on a whim—because so many of them are beautiful ladies—only to be shown pictures of the mother of a girl whose name is rather similar to his and to sense that the girl has an incredible future in store...

Thus the strongest girl, equipped with the strongest armor and the strongest holy sword, would have partnered with Megumin's

classmates, an Axis disciple, and one rough adventurer (maybe not quite as problematic a group as Kazuma's but still not easy to handle) to challenge the Demon King's daughter to a showdown.

After going on a bit of a rampage, the girl would find herself outnumbered and surrounded, but she would be saved by the sudden weakening of all the monsters, and the instant realization that a certain someone somewhere had defeated the Demon King would only make her "brother complex" all the more severe...

So anyway, there are a few spoilers for you; I don't think I'll ever actually include them in a main-series book, so I'm outlining them here. I guess I might use them in a spin-off someday if I have the chance, but this particular story is the tale of how a NEET protagonist with a total-fail party somehow still manages to come out on top and eventually even defeat the Demon King—and that story reached its conclusion with this volume.

Having said that, there are still some mysteries and foreshadowing that I haven't entirely paid off on. For example, why *do* the Demon Kings have the names they do, and why *was* the Demon King's army trying to destroy humanity? Researchers across the world have spent many a sleepless night trying to find the answers, but thanks to a certain someone, the truth is probably lost for good.

Then there's the Demon King's daughter who, after her drubbing at the hands of the fighter princess, went home to her castle only to be pelted with explosions. What difficulties have beset her in life since then?

And as for our Demon-King-defeating protagonist himself, he's eagerly awaiting the ceremony in which he'll be given the largest reward ever bestowed by the nation in recognition of the incredible battle he's won. But he has no idea that his "adopted little sister" has an even greater reward planned for him. Megumin promised to do "something incredible" with him when they got back, while the one who defeats the Demon King also has the right to marry into the royal family...

All of which is to say there are plenty of plot threads that haven't been tied up and stories that haven't been told, so perhaps one day I'll write a sequel to this book. But Kazuma's worked so hard, I think I'll give him a little break to enjoy a bit of peace, quiet, and relaxation.

Which brings us to the roll of gratitude for everyone who's been involved in this series, up to and including this book. To my four generations of editors, everyone at Sneaker Bunko's editorial division, the design people, the proofreaders, the salespeople, and booksellers all over the world.

To all the many people involved with the manga and spin-offs, the anime and games, not to mention the movie.

And to Kurone Mishima-sensei, who developed such characterful characters and who delivered volume after volume of brilliant illustrations despite a punishing schedule.

I give you all my utmost respect for making it possible to bring so many volumes to readers around the world.

Above all, to everyone who read *Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World*—thank you from the bottom of my heart!

Natsume Akatsuki

God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!




Kurone Mishima 2020.5



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